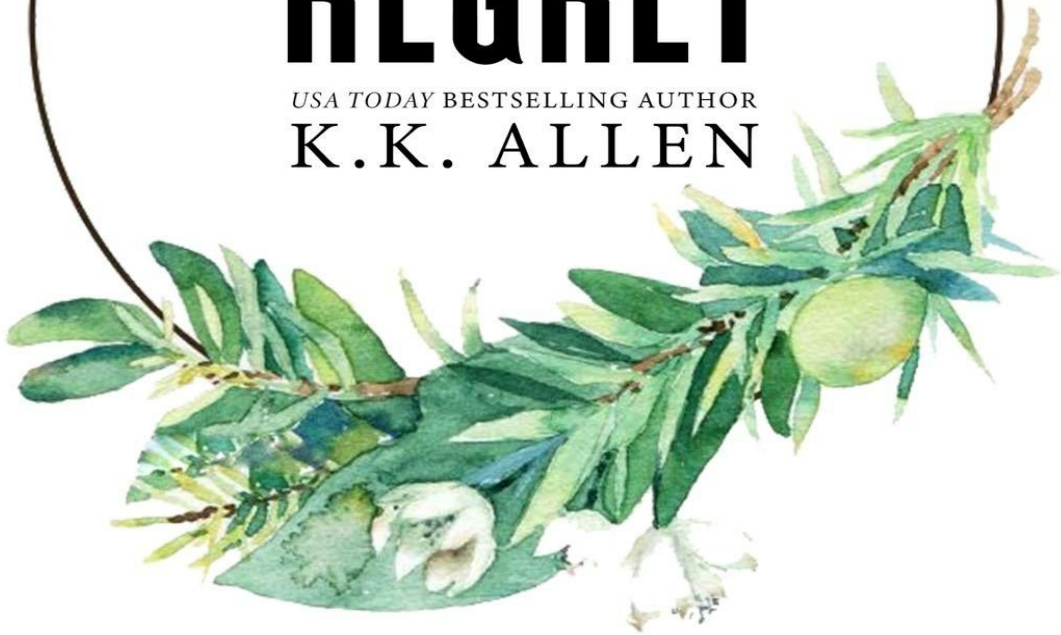


Weight of
REGRET

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
K.K. ALLEN

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Contact SayHello@KK-Allen.com with questions.

Weight of
REGRET

To my parents.

Who knew all those camping trips and vacations to places like Orcas Island would one day inspire stories like this one. Thank you for a childhood filled with epic adventures.

Prologue

HOPE

He's a whisper in the night when I'm all alone and buried under my covers, with nothing else around save for my thoughts.

I always think of him. Anderson Bexley. The man who gripped me at first sight with an amber-eyed glance. But it was his heart that kept me.

It was easy to fall for the man who carried his responsibilities like they were badges of honor—and fall I did. Deeper and deeper into the sweet abyss of dreams fueled by simple moments few and far between.

If only he had fallen with me.

With my hands raised, fingertips reaching out to his shadowy form, I call out to him, desperate for him to see me. It's my own voice that responds in layered echoes as I fall. Because that's what I do. I spiral helplessly and hopelessly into a bottomless pit of agony.

He never catches me.

Bang. Lightning cracks, ripping me straight from the depths of my slumber as a scream shreds my throat. I sit up, gripping my quilt tightly to my chin. My lungs gasp for air as if I'm sucking from a straw, but only at first. My panic always subsides, but the nightmares live on whether I'm asleep or awake. Though, the storms seem to trigger me most.

After a near-fateful shooting left me with a bullet wound in my arm last year, memories of that horrid day have served me a cold dose of reality. This life could be over in the blink of an eye... and I'm still chasing a man who sees me as nothing more than a doting, loyal employee.

Footsteps creek against the old wood outside my door, and then there's an urgent knock that's almost as familiar as my recurring nightmares.

It's him.

I can visualize Anderson's scrunched brows and his tightly closed fist as

he alerts me of his arrival.

“Hope,” he calls from the other side of the door. “Are you okay?”

There was a time when I would find any reason to believe that Anderson Bexley loved me back, even just a little. Even now, I have to fight the glimmer of hope in my heart that wants to believe there’s more to this late-night visit than the mere coincidence of him hearing me scream during his routine rounds of the campground.

My breathing couldn’t possibly come quicker as my feet pad against the worn wood. I wrap my hand around the chipped brass doorknob and squeeze like it’s a stress ball. While constant disappointment has conditioned me to expect nothing in return, my heart beats for him still.

A twist of my wrist—a gentle tug—and I’m staring back into golden eyes shrouded in a dark cloud of worry. A furrowed brow and a downturned bearded mouth greet me.

“Nightmares again?”

My sigh releases with a quick, airy laugh. “It’s just the storm. I’ll be fine.” My faux nonchalance isn’t lost on him. While Anderson may not love me back, he certainly knows me well.

He takes a step toward me, like he expects me to invite him in, but I close the gap in the door an inch instead. The slight move causes him to look down at my attire—a short, yellow silk camisole top and matching shorts. Not something I’d normally wear in front of my boss, but here I am.

While I’m not shy when it comes to my body, something about the change in temperature between us gets my heart racing a little too hard. Anderson’s throat bobs, and his eyes stick a little too long on all the parts of me I’m desperate for him to touch.

It means nothing. I silently scold myself for encouraging that desperate woman inside me who has dreamt of Anderson Bexley since the moment we met three years ago—a dream that felt so close to becoming a reality once upon a time.

His gaze locks back on mine. “I can stay.” There’s a kick inside my chest at his insistence. “Let me stay. At least until you fall asleep.” He darts a look behind him. “The weather isn’t getting any better for another few hours. And…” His eyes search mine.

My heart lobs into my throat. “And what?”

“And I wanted to talk to you about something.” He lets out a breath. “Something important.”

With a release of the knob, I take a step back to allow him entry. One step, and his large frame fills the space. He dominates my senses, triggering a cage of wild butterflies to awaken after weeks of hibernation.

He closes the door behind him, shakes out of his soaked jacket, and hangs it over the wooden chair at my desk. Clearly, he's no stranger to my cabin, considering he stayed here to nurse me back to health after I took a bullet in the arm—a nightmarish incident caused by a psychopath who had trespassed onto our campground. Luckily the bullet only left me with temporary nerve damage. Still, the wound, like my nightmares, will haunt me forever. But it was during those short few weeks afterward that I would have sworn his feelings for me were stronger than he'd ever let on.

He never left my side. Morning, noon, and night, it was me who held his attention. More than work, more than the guests, more than his nonstop family issues, and more than any other employee at camp. For a moment in time, his broody armor fell away, and I got to see the broken man beneath the mask. And deeper I fell.

But the moment I healed enough to go back to work, whatever was beginning to sizzle between us stopped cold. Because that's what Anderson does. He cares for people. He cares for me too—just not in the way that I want.

That's the problem with unrequited love. It doesn't give back, even when you think you're on the verge of something spectacular. It's like looking into a one-way mirror, knowing in the depths of your soul that you're standing in front of *the one*, but he never sees you in return. Still, you try. It's an addiction. A trap. And the deeper you fall, the harder it is to climb your way out.

Anderson reaches my oversized cream chair in the corner of the room, turns around, and opens his mouth, slamming it closed again, like he doesn't know what to do or say next.

I take a tentative step forward. "Is everything okay?"

His jaw ticks. "When were you going to tell me about Seattle?"

Heat blasts me from within, encasing me in an inferno that I don't know how to escape. "How did you hear about that?" My voice is small, shaky. Of all the reasons Anderson could have come here, I hadn't expected that.

His expression darkens. "So, it's true. You're leaving?"

The rapid staccato of my heart has me fighting for my next breath. "I-I haven't decided anything yet. It was just a job offer, but—"

“Is it what you want?” It’s not like Anderson to interrupt anyone. “You applied, so it must be what you want.”

I can feel the hurt and anger rippling off his body.

“Someone sent me the job description, and it sounded interesting. You know how much I love the project management side of things. So I applied. I didn’t think I would actually get an interview.”

“But you did.”

My nod comes with a hard swallow. “I did.”

“So you snuck off to interview.”

“I didn’t sneak off anywhere. I went on my day off. But yeah, I went.”

Silence stretches like taffy between us, lengthening and winding in one sticky knot. “Did you accept?”

“Not yet. I’m not sure if I will.”

“Why not? Clearly, you’re unhappy here.”

My shoulders fall with my sigh, and I tilt my head, imploring eyes desperately trying to get him to see me. *Why doesn’t he ever see me?* “This camp is my home, Anderson. It’s the first home I’ve ever truly had. I’m not unhappy, but there are things I want that I’m not getting here.” *Like you*, I want to scream.

Living on a small island off the coast of the Pacific Northwest comes with endless perks. It also comes with its burdens, and those are the ones I’m fighting off right now. I’m not getting any younger, and it’s starting to feel like my life has stalled, in a sense.

“You recently got a raise. All your medical is paid for, not to mention your room and board.” He waves his hand as though he’s provided me with the best digs in the world. “You’re one of my best senior staff members, Hope. If you’re going to leave, I would appreciate some notice.”

My jaw drops. “Is that all you care about? Notice? Is two weeks sufficient, or do you need more?” My sass, like his anger, is out of character.

Anderson takes a step in my direction, his eyes flashing with emotion that appears to carry more fear than anger. “You could have at least told me what you were considering. Instead, I had to find out from chatter in the dinner hall after you’d left.”

It had been a mistake to tell my coworkers. The island is small, but the camp is smaller. Gossip travels fast.

“I’m sorry.” I chew on my bottom lip, trying to choose my words carefully. “It didn’t feel right telling you when I hadn’t even made up my

mind. There's a lot to consider."

"Like?"

I throw my arms up. "I don't know. All the pros and cons, I guess. Give me a break, okay? If I do choose to leave, it's not like I won't help you find someone to replace me."

"No one can replace you."

His gruff voice is filled with so much emotion, my throat thickens with my next swallow. "That was a sweet thing to say."

"Well, it's true." He blows out a breath and pans his eyes to the ceiling. "Which is why you should take the job."

My breath halts in my lungs as my heart clenches with its unrelenting grip. "Why do you always do that?" I slam my palms to my side. "You say something sweet, and then you take it away like you meant something completely different. Do you want me to stay? Or do you want me to take the job?"

"I want you to be happy." His gaze settles back on me. "I want you to feel fulfilled and valued. You shouldn't have any regrets, and if you don't take this opportunity, then you just might." His face relaxes. "You'll always have a job here if it doesn't work out."

Why do I feel like Anderson is pushing me away before I've even made up my mind? "That's kind of you, but there's still a lot to consider. Seattle is a big city." I wrinkle my face. "There's traffic, skyscrapers, and fast food." Another troubling thought comes to me. "And where would I even live?"

"I'm sure the pay they're offering you is more than triple what I'm able to pay you here." The bitterness isn't lost in his tone.

Instinct draws me closer. I'm well accustomed to the tall, brick walls that surround Anderson. After chipping away at them over the past three years, I'm dying to take a wrecking ball to them to finally break through.

"I don't work at Camp Dakota for the money."

"Camp Bexley," he corrects.

Frustration rolls over me in waves. "Sorry. I'm still getting used to that."

Despite the intense moment we're sharing, I can admit the camp's name change is a huge accomplishment of his—one of many since Anderson took full control of the family business. He's proud, as he should be.

"Well, if you aren't going to fire me, then I think we should end this conversation now. I'm not making any decisions tonight."

Anderson's rock-hard stance remains unchanged, but his throat bobs,

making me desperate to know what's going on under that thick skull of his.

He must finally accept my request because he nods, jaw tight, and sits down in the oversized chair. "I'll stay until the storm passes."

With a sigh, I walk over to the floor lamp to switch it off. As I do, I catch sight of my reflection in the wall mirror. Anderson is there, too, his eyes roaming my backside and locking on my ass. When I pause a second too long, it must alert him, because his eyes shoot up just in time to see he's been caught, before I switch off the light.

When I slide beneath my covers, I know sleep will be impossible. I'm too worked up, and with Anderson only a few feet away, guarding me like he's the protector of my nightmares, I find myself reading more into the situation than is probably true.

"Anderson." His name is a shallow whisper.

"Hope."

My heart beats faster, and I squeeze my eyes shut tight, trying to work up the nerve to speak again. "There's plenty of room next to me." I scoot over and lift the comforter lightly, not sure if he can see me with the dim light of the sky streaming through the cracks in the blinds.

I'm used to his rejection, and I'm ready for it. But for some reason, no words come, just the rustle of his clothes against the chair as he stands, then the slow and deliberate footsteps that bring him to the edge of my bed.

My breath catches in my throat when I hear the clank of his belt as he unbuckles it. The sound of leather sliding slowly against his belt loops comes next. But it's the thud of his jeans hitting the wood floor that sends my blood pumping straight to my heart.

When he climbs in beside me, I turn onto my side to face him. He didn't even hesitate at my invitation, and now here he is mere inches away. This is why my feelings for Anderson Bexley are and will always be so fucked up. He gives me an inch, and I become desperate, rabid, to take a mile.

"You should take the job, Hope." His voice cracks on my name.

My chest squeezes. "I don't want to leave *you*."

"Everyone leaves."

His words are like a vise on my heart, clamping and squeezing the life out of me every time he speaks. "I won't."

"Well, you should. You deserve so much more than I could ever give you."

I scoot toward him, placing my hand on his chest, my eyes pleading with

his. “All you have to do is ask me to stay.” My heart is pounding so furiously I almost miss the hand that slides around my waist and pulls me toward him.

With his eyes squeezed shut and a long release of a sigh, his forehead leans against mine. Our lips are only inches apart, and the buzz I’ve always felt between us only grows stronger.

“Please, Anderson. Say something.”

All he has to do is say the words and give me one small clue that this thing between us isn’t entirely in my imagination.

“I can’t ask that of you.”

His words feel like a slap in the face. Frustration blows through me. With as much time as I’ve given him to meet me halfway, I finally feel as though I’m at my breaking point. How can he be this close to me, and this close to losing me, and not give me anything in return? At this point, I have nothing else to fear.

“Well, then don’t.” I bring my lips closer, inviting him in. “Show me.”

Everything goes hot—my body, the air, our tangled breaths. It’s like the calm before the storm, when everything stills before the warning comes in a violent rumble.

It’s Anderson who closes the distance, merging our lips in an achingly slow caress. When the shock subsides, I match his movements—slow, shaky, and timid, yet there’s an eagerness brimming beneath the surface that’s palpable.

A groan slips from his mouth to mine, awakening a bundle of unspoken feelings within me, and I can’t hold back anymore. My tongue dips between his lips. My hand snakes beneath his cotton shirt and drags up his chest. My front presses closer to his. And he reciprocates with every move—kissing me harder, pulling me flush against his body, and slipping his rough hands beneath my silk shorts.

We find a natural rhythm, our exploring hands daring to reach unexposed territory, our kiss deepening with each passing breath, and my heart rate tripling.

“Make love to me.” It’s just a whisper against his lips, but the moment the words are out of my mouth, I know it’s the wrong thing to say. In the silence that follows, I’m starkly aware of the weather outside that has turned eerily calm.

Anderson freezes, his entire body tensing, and then he pulls away faster than I can even blink. “I can’t do this.” He stands, pulls on his jeans, and

begins to refasten his belt. “You should take the job, Hope.” Anderson turns toward the door.

I can’t breathe, but somehow, I manage to think fast enough to leap out of bed and race across the room to plaster my body against the door, blocking his exit. “You’re pushing me away.” Emotion claws its way up my throat. “Why do you always push me away?”

He shifts his gaze, turning his head with it in a blatant attempt to avoid facing the hurt that he’s caused. “You’re meant for so much more. More than this camp can ever provide you.” He faces me again, the hardness in his eyes revealing his unbreakable stance on the matter. “Take the opportunity. Take it while you can.”

My chin quivers with each word. “And if I don’t?”

His amber eyes flash a warning I can’t quite decipher. “Then you’re fired.”

I take a step to the side at that biting remark and watch him open the door and step back into the night. Then I leave him with a final threat that I hope haunts him for the rest of his days.

“You’re going to regret this, Anderson Bexley.”

Chapter One

ANDERSON

The dock is rickety under my weight when I leave the boathouse—a stark reminder that I have loads of work left to do on the renovations I set out to tackle two years ago. After a generous donation from someone close to our family, everything I ever dreamed for this place began to come to fruition. But in my mad dash to expand and renovate every section of camp, it appears I overlooked the marina.

Lanterns light a clear path for my exit, but I don't head in that direction. Instead, I walk to the edge of the dock and stare out over the moonlit water. This is where I do my best breathing after a long day of work. Whether I'm tending to guests, training employees, drafting contracts for vendors, or filling in for missing staff, moments like these are cherished ones.

It's a perfect fall evening. Clear skies. Quiet night. Our last guests of the fall season left earlier today, which means staff gets the next month off to do as they please—three weeks longer than normal. But with camp renovations winding down, I want to get the place prepped and ready for new guests in the winter. Some staff will use the time to head home to their families, and others will take off for vacations. No one stays when camp is closed.

I've been looking forward to this in-between time more than all the previous ones. Maybe it's the fact that I've been running a million miles an hour over the past years to take my mind off more personal matters. Or maybe because I can finally dedicate the next month to the massive branding overhaul I've been working toward for the past two years.

Come to find out, while drowning myself in my work has been helpful, it hasn't taken away the emptiness I still feel when I think about all the people I've lost along the way to building the camp's success.

Like Hope.

“Hey, stranger.”

The unexpected voice causes me to swivel away from the water, my heart rate rocketing in my chest. The sight of a blonde with silver eyes and a familiar smile shocks me still.

“Shit, Silver. I wasn’t expecting you.” I walk forward, swooping my sister up in my arms and squeezing her tight. “God, I missed you.”

“I missed you, too, doofus.”

She tousles my hair and pulls back with a tilted head. “Looks like my sisterly intuition kicked in at the right time. You look like shit, Bexley.”

My groan leaves me before I can process my emotions, but it serves me right to be all up in my feels when Silver happens to stop by. She knows me better than anyone else in our family, probably because she’s more of an adoptive sort of sister. My family took her in when she was seventeen and needing a home. She was heaven-sent, coming to us at a time I think we all needed it, and she grew on us all—me, the most.

When my brothers all took off to abandon the family camp, Silver stuck around, loyal to a fault. Well, until recent years had her altering her course. I couldn’t be happier for her. It’s been two years since she’s worked as our head camp nurse, but she still pops by on occasion.

“I was just heading to get a drink. Want to join me?”

Silver grins. “Absolutely. As long as I can have my old cabin.”

“No can do. They’re all being refurnished this week, but I can put you up in something better.” I wink.

She gasps and jumps a little. “The new site is all ready?”

“It is,” I tell her.

“I can’t wait to see it all.”

I pause for a second, realizing something is off about Silver’s arrival. “Wait. Did you walk here from the parking lot?”

She nods. “I drove.”

My mouth falls open while my fingers press into my chest in mock horror. “Oh, my. No seaplane this time?”

She rolls her eyes and nudges me from the side. “Hush. I happen to enjoy the drive and the ferry ride. Besides, I had to stop by Orcas Hospital to see one of my old mentors, so I made a day of it. With Kingston out of town, our house gets a little lonely.”

A vague picture pops into my mind of Silver and her NFL star husband’s obscenely large home in Seattle. “I can imagine. Well, you picked the perfect

time to visit. I could use your help with a few things.”

She stuffs her hands into her pockets and shrugs. “Sure. Put me to work. You know I love getting my hands dirty.” She grins up at me.

“All the major renovations are done. No dirty work needed besides a few tune-ups here and there.” I frown when I remember the creaky marina and mentally add that to my to-do list. “I’m talking more about marketing.” I wave my hand around, gesturing to the camp. “I built it, and now I need for them to come. Marketing is a beast I am far from comfortable with. I haven’t had to think about it much over the past year since we’ve always been booked out so far in advance, but now with the new adult site, I’m kind of feeling lost.”

The silence that follows makes me dread saying anything to Silver. I can almost hear Hope’s name in her thoughts, considering they’re best friends and all.

“Have you reached out to her?” Silver’s voice is quiet, gentle, and I hate that I’m the reason for her timidity.

Bitterness rumbles in my chest. “I’m sure you know the answer to that.”

“I do, but I figured I’d talk to you about it for once. You know, if you want to.”

An image of Hope crosses my mind, but it’s not the image I’d grown to adore that I’m seeing now. This one is eerily like the sadness on her face when I told her I’d fire her if she didn’t take the job in Seattle. I pushed her away in the cruelest, coldest way possible, and now I’ve lost her forever.

“You’re going to regret this, Anderson Bexley.”

I still hear her final words. They’re a haunting whisper whenever I’m alone with my thoughts.

“I don’t think we should go there,” I say quietly.

“But it’s been a whole year. You two were so close, and you worked so well together. If anyone can help see you through this marketing stuff, it’s definitely her.”

We take the path that leads toward the newer side of camp that Silver has yet to see completed. While I was excited to show her, all I can think about now is the woman who got away. “There is absolutely no way Hope will consider helping me after...” I shake my head. “Never mind. Can we drop it? I have something I want to show you.”

I steer her down a newly lit path into a territory that used to be nothing but woods for miles. My brothers and I had ventured back into these woods

when we were younger and had a heyday building forts, shooting BB guns, and running our bikes over the same hills so many times that we created trails.

It was during those happy days that everything felt normal between us all, before life happened and reality tore our family apart.

When I hear Silver gasp, I know she spots the surprise I had in store for her. “Anderson Bexley, you put in a restaurant?”

I chuckle and tug her toward the swinging doors. “More like a little saloon. But yes, a restaurant. It’s like a real resort now. Complete with a glamping area filled with luxury tents, five-star cabins, and...” I wave my hand out. “Tada! A bar.”

Her gray eyes are so wide and unbelieving, it hits me straight in the chest. “I can’t believe you’ve been keeping this from me. This is everything you and your brothers dreamed of back in the day.” She wraps her arms around me. “You did it.”

I feel a hollow ping. The fact that I did it without the help of my brothers is a gloomy thought that I wish I could douse along with the reminder that I’d lost Hope. It’s all one dart in the chest after the other.

“So, what’ll it be?” I walk around the curved bar and grin. “Are we getting a little drunk tonight?” I hold up a bottle of wine. “Or a lotta drunk?” I hold up a bottle of Jack Daniels.

Silver tosses her head back and laughs. “I think Jack will take care of us tonight.” She sits on a stool across from me and slaps her palms on the counter. “I’m so proud of you, Anderson. Please tell me the guys know about all the work you’ve put in.”

While Silver is the most supportive member of my family, she’s too sweet and innocent for the truth at times. “You know the deal. Jamison’s caught up in the corporate life in Seattle, Benson’s traveling the world and crashing on couches for a living, and Cayson’s got it made in the Air Force. This place isn’t their dream anymore. They couldn’t care less.”

Silver’s mouth forms a pout. “It all just feels so wrong. Surely, they miss this place. I didn’t even grow up here the way you boys did, and I miss it every day.”

I pour out a shot of whiskey over ice, top it off with some club soda, and slide the tumbler to her. “Yeah, well, we sheltered you from a lot. When you showed up, I think we all wanted to heal, so we tried.”

Silver nods. “You boys put on a good show, I guess. And I was too

caught up in my own baggage to realize things were so off.”

I sigh. “Yeah, well, you were here when things changed faster than any of us were ready for. In the blink of an eye, it felt like I lost everyone.” I smile at the ray of light shining right in front of me. “Except for you. You stayed. You saved me, Silver.”

She places her hand on mine. “And you saved me. What you all did for me back then is something I’ll never be able to repay.”

I raise my brows, telling her precisely how wrong she is. “You repaid us plenty. But now, the success of this place is on my shoulders, and it’s beginning to weigh me down. I need your help.” I give her all the irresistible charm I can muster with a batting of my lashes and a pouty mouth. “Please help me figure out what the fuck I need to do next to get an entirely new type of customer to vacation here.”

Silver’s soft smile is the most genuine thing I’ve ever seen in my life. “You know I’d do anything for you. I still think you should call Hope, but if you don’t feel comfortable doing that, I have another idea. You’ll just have to trust me.”

I raise my arms as another glimmer of light dances in my chest. “You have all my trust. Tell me what I need to do.”

Chapter Two

HOPE

The tips of my almond-shaped nails tap away at my keyboard like my world is up in flames. Urgency. That's the name of the advertising agency that has employed me for the last year, and it's also the fire they've conditioned me to have. It's how I'm to treat every single situation, important or not.

An email pings, and I answer it immediately.

A request for proposal comes in, and I read it before any other agent in the city can get to it.

A client calls, and I drop everything to speak with them.

It's one fire after the next, and I'm the one in charge of putting them out. By the time I get home, my mind is still reeling. So much so that sometimes it feels like I swallowed a ticking clock that never stops, but I know that's just the nature of working for Dexter Van Clark, owner and COO of Urgency Marketing Services. His business dealings are as posh as his name, which is why I was certain that he would fire me as soon as he realized I was the complete opposite.

"Miss Davies," an authoritative voice chimes over my phone intercom. "Please stop by my office. We have a new proposal to discuss."

My pulse quickens as I gather my notebook and pen while pressing down on the intercom button to respond. "I'll be right there Dex... er... Mr. Van Clark."

I pull my hand away like I've been burned and squeeze my lids closed. *Shit*. Why is he always so serious? When I walked into this place last year, I was my old bubbly self, always trying to make someone laugh or smile. All that began to slip away as I learned how to play the corporate game, and Mr. Van Clark was the perfect mentor. He was also as intimidating as hell, with

his quizzical gaze, challenging rise of his brows, and a professional demeanor that is well beyond his years. Before meeting him, I never would have guessed he was in his late twenties.

I make the short walk down the hall to the corner office. The shades that face the hallway are drawn, but his door is cracked a smidge, so I push it open and enter the naturally lit room. The office is an immaculate masterpiece, with one full window wall that overlooks Bell Street in downtown Seattle, a white leather couch, minimal decorations, and a desk that looks like it came straight from the seventies.

I've never understood the obsession with modern furniture. To me, it gives off nothing but cold and uncomfortable vibes. Or maybe that's because I spent three years living in a cozy cabin and learned that there was a whole lot more to life than having the latest designer trends.

The door clicks shut behind me, but Mr. Van Clark doesn't acknowledge my existence by looking up from whatever he's typing on the computer. His concentrated gaze remains as cold as the air blowing through the AC unit.

The young, devastatingly handsome entrepreneur has made a name for himself in Seattle as his competition's top rival. His passion for being the best is as addictive as it is intimidating. His rigid jawline, sharp cut of his cheekbones, and perfectly set dark hair make one question whether they should love him or hate him. I, for one, wish I could hate him.

This is normally the drill. I enter, I sit, I wait. Eventually, the swanky socialite will pull his head out of his ass to give me the time of day. But today, I'm in a mood—a foul mood, thanks to an account that slipped right out of my fingers and landed in the arms of Mallory Shuman.

Mallory is the other project manager on board with qualifications that trump mine any day of the week. She's been out for blood since the moment I stepped foot in the office, yet Dexter does nothing to stop her blatant viciousness. He expects me to fight back in the form of better presentations, bigger profit margins, and more positive reviews from our clients.

My heels tap across the porcelain floor until I reach his desk and realize that he's not ignoring me. He's simply deeply focused on whatever is on his screen. Still, I've learned that in order to be seen at Urgency, I must demand it.

I clear my throat, causing my boss's head to snap up, his eyes clear with surprise at my interruption. Interruptions aren't my style, and neither is the raised brow on my forehead, pinned there just for him. But can he really be

upset when he's the one who demanded my presence?

Instinct prompts me to straighten my shoulders. "You needed to see me, Mr. Van Clark?"

He lifts his fingers from the keyboard and leans back in his chair while assessing me with narrowed lids. "I certainly did, Miss Davies." His inappropriate gaze drifts between my yellow blazer, down to my knee-high pencil skirt, only stopping there because the edge of his desk is blocking his view. "You're impatient today."

"Just busy," I snap.

Steel-gray eyes flick back to mine. "Well, then. Have a seat, and we'll get started right away. Because in my opinion, you aren't busy enough."

My mouth falls open, and my chest heats. How dare he speak to me like that when he knows damn well that I put in a generous number of extra hours, no matter what the situation. "Mr. Van—"

His palm shoots out, stopping me from going any further. "You wanted to get started, so let's do just that. I'll make this quick. There's a marketing project that I'll need you to head with a new client who is in desperate need of our expertise for their grand reopening. You'll be on-site for two weeks, then you'll remain their lead contact back here at the office. While you're there, they'll provide your lodging, your meals, and your transportation if needed. It's not the Ritz, not in the least," he mumbles, "but there's potential, and I believe you're the right woman for the job. Any questions?"

My head is spinning at the news he unleashed. Did I hear him correctly? He wants to give me my own project, just like that? "I'm sorry, I think I might be misunderstanding. What about Mallory?" Even when projects do become mine, she usually always supervises my every move.

"Unfortunately, this is a smaller budget project than we're used to. I can only send one of you. Since you were requested by the client, it's got to be you."

"I was requested? By who?"

"By an ex-coworker of yours. A Miss Silver Livingston."

I should have known my best friend would use her powers to call in favors for me. She knows how hard I've been working to land my first solo contract. Whatever the reason, I'm grateful. I finally get an opportunity to prove myself without Mallory casting a shadow over all of my hard work.

"The project is yours, Miss Davies." He tilts his head. "Unless you aren't up for the task."

I jump slightly at his condescending tone. “Of course I am. You know I’ve been wanting my own account for some time now. It’s just—there’s usually a different process to all of this, and Mallory is normally part of that process. I’m making sure I’m not missing anything.”

“You’ve been at Urgency for a year now. Your annual review is approaching, and you’ve yet to manage a single project on your own.”

“Not for lack of deserving one.” My sharp tone rivals his, which I’ve learned is exactly what Dexter Van Clark gets off on.

His chin rises at my challenge before he slides a black folder from his desk and waves it in the air like he’s dangling bait. “Well, then now is your time to shine, Miss Davies. Prove to me that you’re capable of managing all aspects of this reopening, from start to finish, and then we can talk about your future at Urgency. Consider this a probationary promotion.”

I swallow while measuring my next move. He’s not going to get up from that chair to hand me that folder. He wants me to walk around his desk and take it. Without another second of delay, I rise and do as he expects.

He turns his chair at my approach, showcasing a fully hard erection fighting its way through his shiny gray pants. I wish I didn’t find it insanely hot and that my skin didn’t go flush at the sight. He can probably see my own arousal written on my face. And if I get any closer, he’ll be able to hear the shallow breaths that escape. I need to stand my ground.

I keep a couple feet of distance between us and reach for the folder he holds out to me. But when I go to take it, his grip is unrelenting as he keeps hold of one side of the folder and stares directly into my eyes. “Looking rather delectable today, Miss Davies.” His voice is low and raspy, and I swear I feel it vibrating between my thighs.

He gives a little tug of the folder we’re both gripping, causing me to stumble the last couple of steps and land directly between his opened legs. Sleek, manicured fingers grip my chin while yanking me to his greedy mouth. Then he groans before sliding his tongue against mine like he’s trying to claim it the way he does with everything else he wants.

“Fuck me,” he growls.

My heart jerks into my throat, and my skin blisters with the potential embarrassment of getting caught. “What?” I laugh. “Now?”

He presses a kiss to my neck and reaches between my legs. “Do you have a problem with my request, Miss Davies?”

My body trembles against his touch. “Your *request* is highly

inappropriate, considering Mallory is due to your office for a meeting any minute now.”

He lifts his brows with a challenge as his fingers graze the fabric over my opening. “You’ll be relieved to know I’ve already pushed her meeting. We have fifteen minutes.” Smooth fingers slip beneath the thin fabric to find my aching center. “Unless you’d like for me to call her in here so she can watch everything I’m about to do to you.”

My glare is teasing. “You wouldn’t.”

He hums and pushes two fingers deep inside me so fast, a gasp flies from my throat. “You’re right. I’m not the sharing type.” He bends his fingers at their deepest point, his gaze shifting to where his hand disappears beneath my skirt. “Besides, I happen to recall you charging in here like time was of the essence. I would hate to keep you from more important matters.”

His thumb toys with my clit, a deep pleasurable hum vibrating from his chest.

“Perhaps I can reprioritize my to-do list.”

A cocky smile curves his lips. “Fucking your boss should always be at the top of your priority list, Miss Davies.”

He jerks his hand out from inside me, slips my panties down to my ankles, and lifts me onto his desk—all while he remains sitting. I’m already panting when he rolls his chair closer to me and shoves my skirt up to my waist, exposing me to him and to the window at his back. I’ve walked by the downtown high-rise building enough times to know there’s no shot of seeing what’s inside them during the day, but the fact that I can still see everything outside adds an unexpected thrill to his foreplay, if I can even call it that. Dexter is a busy man, which usually means he’s all about getting straight to the point.

He stands while unbuttoning his cuffs before rolling them up his forearms, his gaze never leaving my heated center. His tongue darts out, wetting his bottom lip, and then he drops his pants and pushes inside me, almost as fast as his fingers entered me. I never even saw him roll on the condom, but I feel the barrier between us.

Urgency. It took me two minutes during my first interview with the man to understand why he named his company what he did. Come to find out, he fucks with that same passion. Like he’ll die if he doesn’t make me come apart in record time.

“I missed you,” he rasps, his lust-filled gaze fascinated with where we’re

connected before his lids flip up to lock on mine. “New York wasn’t the same without you, Hope.”

Hope. It still sounds strange when I hear him say my first name. Even though our fling has been a four-month affair by this point, I’m only *Miss Davies* in the office.

We first formed a connection on our way to a client meeting in New York City. My heart was still raw over Anderson’s rejection and from leaving the camp I’d come to know as my home. Dexter was the last person I ever expected to pull me from the darkness, but he was just the distraction I needed, at a time when I needed it most. To my surprise, our connection turned into a hookup and quickly took roots from there, continuing well beyond what I’d anticipated, but we’ve yet to make anything official.

Dexter lifts my hips, so I’m no longer seated, and he pounds into me faster while I press my palms hard against the desk. He does all the work, his dominant nature something I’ve had to adjust to. Whenever I even attempt to take control, he steals it right back, like he’s the only one who can bring me to orgasm.

“Fuck yes,” he says through gritted teeth. His pleading eyes lock on me. “Tell me you’re with me.”

“I’m right there with you.”

My assurance must have been the key to unlock the floodgate, because he’s spilling inside of me almost as soon as I’m done with my sentence.

His mouth slams to mine. “I’ll never get enough of you. These next two weeks are going to be pure torture without you right down the hall.”

My lips curl at the corners because no matter how impatient of a man he might be, he’s still sexy as hell. “You act like I’m leaving tomorrow.”

His eyes widen, and he pulls back slightly. “I didn’t tell you? You do leave tomorrow. Bright and early to catch the first ferry out.”

A flurry of emotions whip through me—emotions I can’t quite make sense of. I let out a laugh to cover my discomfort. “Ferry? Where exactly are you sending me?”

Dexter grins, slips the black envelope off his desk again, and offers it to me. This time, he lets me take it. “It’s all in here. Everything you need to know about our new client. Where to go, who you’ll meet, what your job entails. You’ll mostly be at their beck and call to ensure their reopening is a huge success. And Hope”—his sharp eyes burn into mine—“this may be a small job now, but the potential is huge, especially considering their

connections. I need you to bring your A game.”

More discomfort mounts within me. Something seems wrong, but I can't sort through my thoughts fast enough to realize why I feel this way. Staring down at the envelope, I'm almost fearful to open it.

“Come to dinner with me tonight.”

His demand is almost as shocking as the opportunity he's handed me today. “W-what? Aren't you going out with your investors?”

He nods. “I am. And they're eager to meet the mystery woman I've been all wrapped up in. It's time I start showing you off. As my girlfriend.”

My head is spinning. “Y-Your girlfriend?” I'm completely flattered while also completely terrified. “You and I both know how fast news travels in this industry. The rumor mill will go crazy in this office when they find out we've been sleeping together.”

“Who cares?” He scoffs. “I own the company. Who I date is of no concern to my employees. Besides, the longer we keep our relationship a secret, the more risk there is that they'll find out on their own.”

I hitch a brow. “My review is coming up, remember? I need to be on my best behavior.”

His gaze drops to where I'm still completely bare. “I'd say your behavior has been indecent at best today.”

I close my legs and shove my skirt down with a laugh. “I blame my boss for propositioning me to begin with.”

He sits up and places his hands on my hips, not playing into my teasing. “Hope, I don't want you to be my dirty little secret anymore. At first, it made sense for us to keep things between us, but we're past that now.”

I tilt my head. “Are we?” My feelings are not the same, considering I'm the one with everything to lose. “I've worked hard to earn respect with everyone here.”

“They'll still respect you.” He's as confident as he is demanding. “I'll make sure of it.”

I sigh, knowing there's no arguing with him. The best I can do is buy myself more time.

There's a light tapping on the door I recognize as belonging to Mallory. I scramble off the desk to grab my underwear.

“One moment,” Dexter booms then turns back to me.

I ignore his stare while I situate my clothing, realizing that this might be the first time I've felt relief from Mallory's presence.

“Let’s make a deal,” he says, giving up on getting me to look at him. “You’re going to be gone working on this project. Take that time to think about what you want from us. We’ll talk when you’re back.”

My head jerks up, assessing his expression. His words feel like an ultimatum. He didn’t phrase it that way, but the hint of what could happen when I return to Seattle has my stomach tied up in knots. “If that’s what you want.”

His jaw ticks, and he nods while his gray eyes become colder at my response. “We both know what I want, Miss Davies. The question is, what do you want?”

I step forward and hold on to his lapel. “I want you, Dexter.”

He lifts his brows. “Tell me that in two weeks, and I just might believe you.” He steps to the side so he can get around me. “Our time is up,” he booms theatrically for Mallory’s benefit. “I have another appointment.”

I follow him, only stopping at the door to face him one last time. I’m so shaken up, I can’t even look him in the eyes. “Thank you for the opportunity, *Mr. Van Clark.*”

“Don’t thank me yet, *Miss Davies.*” He nods to the envelope I’m still clutching in my right hand. “Study up. There’s a lot of history in there you should brush up on. The family who owns the camp you’ll be going to has owned it for decades. Since the father retired, he left the business to his four sons, but only one of them still works there. I don’t think they’re all on speaking terms. I don’t know why.”

The air goes cold, and suddenly it’s as though everything is moving in slow motion. Every sip of air feels like a struggle to breathe. His words are the final pieces of a puzzle clicking in place. And now I understand why Silver was the one who recommended me for the job.

“You’re sending me to Camp Bexley?” I ask, needing the confirmation before I react in any way.

Dexter looks amused by my guess. “You know of it?”

It amazes me how little Dexter knows about my past. “I used to work there. It was on my resume,” I add, wondering if that will trigger anything for him.

“Ah, your old stomping grounds. Even better. I guess you won’t have much studying to do after all.” He winks, and for a second, I think the two of us might be okay, but then I remember where he’s sending me.

Back to Orcas Island.

Back to Camp Bexley.
Back to *him*.

Chapter Three

ANDERSON

The hours tick by, well past the time the marketing representative that Silver hired was scheduled to arrive. As I work through the day, tending to the stables, checking on contractors who are unloading furniture and boxes of decor into the newer cabins, and analyzing financial documents in my office, eight o'clock in the morning becomes noon, then noon becomes four in the evening—at which point I'm convinced Silver relayed the information wrong.

Major fail, I type with quick fingers. The saving grace you hired is a no-show.

What?! Silver responds quickly. There's no way. The contract was signed, and the owner himself assured me she would be there first thing in the morning. Maybe her ferry was delayed. Let me check.

Annoyance rumbles through me. One of the things my father instilled in all his sons since we were little was the importance of respecting the time we give and take from others. The fact that a professional company is sending me an employee who doesn't show up on time is a major red flag.

Maybe this was a bad idea. I let out a heavy sigh, realizing my negative attitude might come across as ungrateful when Silver was only trying to help. *Thank you for everything, but I can figure this out on my own.*

She's quick to type back. Calm down. She's already there.

I sit back in my chair, and my eyes lock on the security feed aimed at the empty parking lot. *No, she's not. I'm staring at the parking lot now.*

Not there at the camp yet, but she's on the island. She says she's heading there now.

Confused at how Silver has access to this person when I don't even know the woman's name is beyond me, but as I'm about to type another disgruntled

message, a fancy white car enters the parking lot.

It's not a great first impression—not at all—but I promise Silver I'll be nice to the poor marketing rep then begin my short walk to greet her.

Walking the trails always feels so strange during these blackout weeks when staff is absent. The camp is naturally peaceful but hardly ever quiet. Not when kids are tearing down the trails, splashing into the lake, and screaming during playtime on the big, open field.

I know that these are the times when I should allow myself to bask in the stillness of it all and just breathe. But at thirty-six years old, it's harder than ever to turn my brain off, even when I need to most. There's always something to worry about or fix. And I find it difficult not to resent my brothers for leaving me to manage it all on my own.

Then again, why should I be surprised? Everyone leaves. I've grown used to that disheartening fact. I've had to after all that I've experienced over the years with different guests every week and employee turnover. Camp is where everyone comes for a good time. It's not where they stay forever. There's too much heartbreak in attachment, which is why I keep my personal and business relationships at arm's length. Life is safer that way.

My focus moves back to the sports car that's now parked in one of the first stalls. The door finally opens and a metallic-gold high heel plants itself on the concrete, followed by another.

Dread fills me at my second negative impression of this woman. First, she's late. Second, she's dressed like she's expecting five-star accommodations, which is the complete opposite of what she's about to get.

Working my way from her impressive heels, I pan up to find her wearing an equally impressive silky, yellow jumpsuit that stops above the ankles, and a short white blazer around her shoulders and arms. Thick and long brown hair curls down her back, bright pink lipstick coats her pouty lips, and big black shades act like a mask hiding half her face. Until she bows her head and slips them off and I get my first true look at the woman I'm supposed to trust to help with my grand reopening.

I'm not sure what stops working first—my heart or my throat. But the second I recognize Hope is the moment the pain of losing her comes crashing and burning all around me. The damage I did, the woman I lost, the deep-seeded desire I smothered like it wasn't the last flame left standing in my life.

She was the one. The only one I'd ever felt could make my dimly lit world a better place, and I pushed her away as though she didn't even matter.

“Hello, Anderson. I’m sorry I’m late, but I—” She shakes her head, her face flush with embarrassment—or unease. Whatever it is, she’s nothing like the bubbly and always-smiling woman I remember. “I was getting reacquainted with my surroundings. It’s been a while.” She steps forward, shooting her hand out to shake mine.

I stare at it, confused by her professionalism, but I take it, because I suppose I should play along. Her hand is soft to the touch, but firm in my grip, like a true business professional. It seems she’s taken to her new city life quite well. But my brain is still clicking together like a puzzle, wondering how the hell I hadn’t seen this one coming. Or rather, how I hadn’t suspected Silver was up to more than she was letting on when she told me to trust her.

“Nice to see you again.” They’re my first awkward words spoken to her after a year apart, and I curse myself in my head at how cold they sound coming out. But it’s as if I’m looking at a stranger.

Her smile is pinched when she takes her hand back. “Right. Well, once I get situated, we can get started.” Her focus darts over my shoulder, and her eyes become glossy for a moment. Just as fast, she seems to snap out of whatever thoughts took hold, and she’s walking to her trunk while pushing a button on her clicker.

“Fancy car,” I comment. Now that I have a better view, I see that the car is a brand-new Honda Accord coupe, all decked out with tan leather, a sunroof, and a spoiler.

She avoids returning my gaze this time while reaching into her trunk. “Can you believe it’s the first car I ever purchased for myself? The clunker my parents gave me in high school was good to me, but it started breaking down every day the moment I moved to Seattle. I tried fixing her countless times until my boss convinced me to move on.”

I remember her old car well. She’d barely driven it, but it was unmistakably hers, with its faded cherry red exterior and fuzzy dice in the mirror. It always seemed like she was so proud of her one and only possession that she’d brought to camp.

Hope pulls out a large suitcase and sets it by her side.

“Let me get that.”

She waves a hand to tell me it’s okay, she’s got it. “Where to? I assume my old cabin is gone.”

Her pinched smile twists at my insides. “It is.” I reach for her suitcase again, this time ignoring her when she tries to keep her grip on it. I’m not

letting her lug her suitcase half a mile in those heels. “This way.”

I take the lead through the main trail she used to frequent then take a turn down a trail she may not remember all that well since it was finished after she left town. “I’ll give you the full tour tomorrow morning. Tonight, I figure you can get settled in and...”

She cocks a brow at me, and I can’t help but notice how well she walks along the gravel path in her heels. “And?”

“Well, I had all this stuff planned today to get to know whoever would be coming to help me with this grand reopening, but I wasn’t expecting it to be you. Seeing as you already know the place *and me*, it’s—”

“Wait. What?”

I’m so caught up in my rushed explanation that I didn’t realize she’d stopped walking seconds ago. I stop and face her, confused. “What did I say?”

Her brows pinch together. “What do you mean you didn’t expect it to be me? My boss mentioned Silver set this all up, but—you didn’t request me?”

My mouth opens but no words come out. I’m too afraid to speak when the realization about this reunion becomes much clearer. Silver may have arranged the whole thing, but clearly she’d done it without Hope’s knowledge. “Um,” I start. “Well, Silver stopped by a couple of weeks ago and I let it slip that I needed help with the reopening. She said she’d find someone.” I swallow. “She didn’t tell me that it was you.”

Something about Hope’s fallen expression crushes me, reminding me of the last time I’d seen her. The last thing I want to do is hurt her again, but it seems all I’m capable of.

“I didn’t realize Silver was involved, but I guess it makes sense now.” Her eyes darken with a coldness I’ve never seen before. “You would have never asked for me to come back. You didn’t want me here to begin with.”

“Hope, that’s not true.”

She coughs out a laugh. “It is true, or you would have called the moment you needed to plan this grand reopening of yours. You and I both know I’m the right person for the job.”

“You are.” I can’t argue with that.

“So then why didn’t you call, Anderson? What is it about me that repels you so much that you can’t even pick up the phone and ask for my help? Your blueprint for the camp’s remodel was created by me. It may have been your vision and your execution, but it’s all my design.”

Every question and point made is like another brick thrown at me. “You don’t repel me, Hope. You never did. I didn’t call you because rumor was you were perfectly content in Seattle, and I wasn’t about to ruin that for you.”

Hope scoffs and starts to walk past me. “Cop out. Everything you say is yet another excuse to keep everyone away.”

“Wait a second,” I boom, ready to have it out right here and now.

She flips around, pinning me with a hard stare. “No, you wait a second. I didn’t choose to come back here, but you’re my first real client, and I really need this to go well. I’ll do my best to keep the past behind us, but don’t for a single second think that I’ll be your puppy dog, hanging on to your every step, like I used to be. That’s not who I am anymore, Anderson Bexley, and the quicker you realize that, the better off we’ll both be.”

My chest squeezes as I assess the woman who’s both a stranger and the one who got away. “You’ll get nothing but glowing feedback from me. Just tell me what you need, and it’s yours.”

She sucks in her bottom lip like she always used to do to stop herself from saying something she shouldn’t, and her eyes dart between mine. The next second, she’s righting her shoulders and inhaling a deep breath. “Thank you.” She averts her eyes. “I’d like to go to my cabin now.”

Chapter Four

HOPE

My rush to get to my cabin subsides after a handful of steps. While I'm playing up my confidence in these toe-crushing heels, I can't wait to take them off and soak my feet in the tub. As I grit my teeth and bear the pain, I look around at my spacious surroundings. It's everything I remember and then strange at the same time. While the nature of it all is the same—the rustling trees that shade the long, winding pathways, and the beautiful soundtrack of nature echoing all around—the sense of home I had always embraced before is nowhere to be found.

“It's so quiet.” My words are so soft, I almost expect Anderson to have missed them.

“It's always quiet here.”

I shake my head, my frustration with him stemming from far more than his response to my comment. “Not like this. It feels—different.”

“Welcome to the off-season. You never stuck around for one of those.”

I shrug. “No one did. It was like the uncool thing to do, especially if you had a family to go back to.”

His brows bend as he darts a look my way. “Then where did you always jet off to?”

Anderson's question could sound harsh coming from anyone else, but I know he doesn't mean it that way. He's one of two people I've ever shared my story with, and at one point, I could have sworn that my story had brought us closer together.

He knows that my mom was, is, and always will be a junkie. I'd spent my entire senior year of high school picking her up from bars and pulling her out of alleyways. It was terrible. And my dad was no better, considering he's been behind bars most of my life.

“That’s for me to know and for you to never find out.” My stomach twists at my words, but my familiar response makes him smile.

“You always were quite the mystery.”

With that, I frown and dare a glance in his direction. “All you had to do was ask.”

“I have asked, and you would never tell me.”

I sigh and shake my head. “Not about that. Anything but that. You knew more about me than anyone, even Silver.”

His eyes flash with surprise, and then he’s turning his head forward, his gaze fastened to something ahead.

I let my eyes adjust to the scattered cluster of lit cabins ahead. Trees and pathways separate them all, but it’s clear with one glance that they’re all about ten steps above the old accommodations.

“You did all of this in the past year?” If I weren’t afraid of bugs flying into my mouth, my jaw would be dropping to the ground at the sight.

“This isn’t even half of it.”

I can’t help but steal another glance at the ruggedly handsome man who I’ve had nothing but hateful thoughts toward since we were last together. He looks like he’s aged a few years, with his deeply creased forehead, darkened skin, and the added fullness to his beard. His thick, wavy dark-brown hair still carries streaks of gold.

For someone who loves this place, it’s obvious that the responsibility is weighing on him. Despite our differences and the way he treated me, my heart still squeezes for him.

“I can’t wait to see the rest.”

His strides are longer than mine, but I can tell he’s walking slower than his normal gait for my benefit. The fact that he hasn’t commented on my ridiculous heels by now is a clear indicator of how far apart we’ve grown since I left. He would always find any and all reasons to throw a jab my way, and while I always knew it was in good fun, I couldn’t help but think it meant something more.

After a year away from Anderson, I realize just how naive I’d been all those years pining for a man who couldn’t see a damn thing beyond the success of his camp. It was like he was always trying to prove something. And now that he’s that much closer to having all he’s ever dreamed of, I have a sneaking suspicion that it won’t be enough.

“This is it.” He gestures to a brownish-gray cottage with a tall, narrow

roof and white shutters. “It’s yours for the length of your stay. You’re all stocked up with linens and towels, and if you need to use the laundry room, feel free. There’s food in the fridge, but help yourself to anything in the staff room and cafeteria kitchen. Anything else, let me know.”

I pinch back a smile at the awkwardness of it all and step past him. “Thank you, Anderson. I’m sure everything is perfect.” I start to make my way up the short staircase before looking over my shoulder. “When would you like to get started?”

He shakes his head slightly before his eyes lock on mine again. “Well, before I knew it was you who was showing up, I thought we could talk over dinner tonight and hit the ground running in the morning. But since we already know each other—”

“Dinner sounds great,” I snap, my eyes sharp on his. “We may have a history, but you hired me to do a job. I expect you won’t treat me any differently than you would whoever had shown up.”

He shakes his head, as if ashamed. “Of course. I didn’t mean to insinuate that I wouldn’t. It’s just”—his eyes dart between mine—“you didn’t choose to come back here, and I would hate to make you any more uncomfortable than I already have.”

A cynical laugh bubbles up my chest. “It’s a little late for that, don’t you think?” I start to take the last step while muttering under my breath. “About a year too late.”



* * *

“What do you mean you just got there?” Dexter’s irritation seeps through his confusion. “I thought you left on the first ferry out this morning.”

I cringe, happy that Dexter can’t see me now. If only he knew the mental torture I’ve been through today. The moment I stepped on that ferry in Anacortes, the memories of my past in Orcas Island hit me like a ton of

bricks. I practically had a meltdown in the bathroom most of the ferry ride through the San Juan Islands, and then once I finally stepped foot on the island, I felt as though I was moving through quicksand.

Dexter also doesn't need to know the number of times I almost turned around and fled back to Seattle. How was I going to face Anderson again? Not only that, how was I going to spend two whole weeks with him? I've always believed that all things come full circle, but I didn't believe it would happen like this.

I fall back onto the plush queen bed and stare up at the wood-paneled ceiling. "Everything is great, Dexter. Don't worry, okay? Anderson Bexley and I go way back. He knows what I'm capable of. And he's ready to hit the ground running right away."

"Good," Dexter huffs. "I'm heading out to that dinner cruise with Mallory and her new client. I expect your first daily report tomorrow."

I wrinkle my nose at Dexter's attempt to micromanage me. "You can expect my first *weekly* report on Friday, Mr. Van Clark."

"It wasn't a negotiation."

"Oh, I'm not negotiating. You sent me here to do my job, and I can't do that if I'm spending half my week filling out reports." I rethink my tone and aim to soften it. "Trust me, Dexter. Please."

A loud sigh blows into the speaker. "As you wish. This is your project. Handle it however you want."

A smile spreads across my face at the surprisingly easy win. Dexter doesn't usually back down so fast. I was prepared for battle. "Thank you."

I bite down on my lip, suddenly wishing I had gone over to his place last night when he'd invited me. Our quick office hookup wasn't enough to satisfy me for two whole weeks. If there's one thing I've learned about myself in my relationship with Dexter, it's how ravenous I am for a good sexual release.

"Can we cut the business talk now?" I snuffle the desire that burns in my core to focus on something he'd said earlier. "I'd much rather hear about this dinner cruise you're going on tonight with Mallory."

"You make it sound like she's my date. The yacht belongs to her clients, and we're just taking a cruise around the sound."

I can picture his narrowed eyes that come with every scolding. "Sounds romantic." My bitter slur earns me a laugh.

I stew over the fact that Mallory's client should be mine. I spent countless

hours creating the perfect presentation that I was certain would knock the prestigious Seattle jeweler off his feet. I'm certain he was ready to choose me for the job too. That is, until Mallory strolled in with her newly purchased diamond-studded bracelet that she'd bought from his shop the day before. Dexter's response to my lost opportunity: *"You could learn a thing or two from Mallory."*

"You're jealous."

His accusation ignites my defenses. Not once have I questioned Mallory and Dexter's relationship, which—now that he mentions it—is a little strange. Most women would be fuming at the thought of their secret fling spending an evening on a yacht with their biggest nemesis. I simply despise the woman.

"That's not it at all. I'm still bitter about losing to her. That's all."

"Good," he snaps dryly. "Jealousy is a game I have no time for. And that bitterness will only challenge you to do better next time."

My eyes roll to the back of my head. I almost forgot how patronizing the man can be when we're on the phone. Dexter and I are either together at work or at his place, so this isn't a frequent occurrence, thank goodness. He's so damn impatient and straight to the point. I like to think it's one of the things he'd seen in me when we first got together. I made him laugh, and he taught me how to navigate the corporate world.

"You're moldable. I like that," he'd always tell me.

Realizing we've run out of things to say, I sigh and check the digital clock on the other side of the room. "Looks like it's time for me to run off to dinner too. Anderson thought we could talk shop tonight before the real work begins." There's a squeeze in my chest at hearing his name slip past my lips.

"Enjoy dinner." His words are muffled as though he's dressing as he speaks. "Report back on how the food is. I might be able to send you some care packages if need be."

His assumption that the food is of low quality irks me. "I used to live here, remember? The food is great." My lie feels small compared to what I feel like I'm protecting.

He chuckles like he doesn't believe me. "Suit yourself. If you change your mind, I'll courier over some meals from that cafe you love near the office."

"That won't be necessary. Goodnight, Dexter."

"Goodnight, Hope. Oh, and don't be afraid to show some cleavage

tonight. I hear this Anderson Bexley is a lonely man. Shouldn't be too hard to win him over."

It takes everything in my strength to not throw my phone against the window at his questionable business ethics. Not once since we've known each other has he said anything remotely as offensive to me. Anger is practically steaming from my pores. "Great idea. Hell, maybe I'll show up naked and fuck him right there in the cafeteria. That should really win him over." I lift myself from bed.

"Don't you fucking da—"

"Glad you don't have time for jealous games."

I end the call before he can finish his sentence and then power the device off for the night, maybe longer. Right now, I couldn't give less fucks. I have a client dinner to prepare for.

Chapter Five

ANDERSON

The crunch of gravel beneath my sneakers is as haunting a sound as the minutes of silence that stretched before it. I'd never considered it a bad thing to be alone with my thoughts until the moment Hope escaped into her cabin earlier today. The sound of her door closing triggered a gamut of emotions that I'd managed to suppress.

She's back, but that only means that I am finally facing what I chose to ignore for far too long. I'd let her leave when I only ever wanted her to stay. But how selfish would it have been to ask her for what I truly wanted while knowing a dream opportunity was waiting for her in Seattle? I couldn't keep her from that, just like I couldn't keep my brothers from leaving.

Besides, she had only been twenty-five—twenty-six now—but that's ten years younger than me. Jamison was twenty-four when he made his exit. At least he'd waited for Cayson to graduate from high school and leave for the Air Force, unlike Benson, who had jetted the moment he turned eighteen. Hope couldn't have been at all ready to make the kind of commitment to this place that I'd made. It would have only been a matter of time before she made the same decision to walk away as my brothers had. And that's a reality that I'm forced to deal with.

I'm nearing her cabin when I see a flutter of cream curtains. Hope appears in front of the window and stands in front of the floor-length mirror. Her forehead creases as she presses her hands down her sides like she's trying to flatten out the wrinkles of a pink blouse that was surely a victim of her luggage.

Her nose flares and her mouth parts as her chest deflates. Something deep down tells me her frustration isn't coming from her uncooperative clothing. Her expression leads me to believe that being here is the last place on earth

she wants to be.

Hesitation almost jerks me back from continuing forward, but I think better of it and take quicker steps toward her instead. The last time I gave Hope the space I thought she needed, she walked away and left a big, gaping hole in my chest. I won't make that mistake again.

I knock twice and step back from the door, bracing myself to see Hope face-to-face again. The door starts to swing open. I'm expecting the gut punch that will inevitably come. She always took my breath away, but seeing her again has stirred a deep desire in me I'd almost forgotten.

Hope Davies is unquestionably beautiful. That much hasn't changed. Yet, everything about her seems different.

Her light-brown hair is parted in the middle and tucked behind her ears, a change from her thick mane that was always wild and unruly while framing her face. Her bow-shaped lips wear a faint shade of pink that matches her flushed cheeks, different from the shiny coat of green-apple gloss that used to shimmer there. Her lashes appear thicker and longer now as she peers over my shoulder with those innocent greenish-blue eyes. But as stunning as she is, I can't help but notice something is missing.

Like the way her smile used to burst through her eyes. Where is that spark in her that used to light a match under my ass every time I even thought about doubting myself? I refuse to believe that woman is gone, replaced by this new version who's lost all sense of what made her so *Hope*. And I'm determined to find her.

"Ready for dinner?"

"Sure am." Her eyes still don't quite meet mine as she moves across the threshold to shut the door behind her. She doesn't utter another word until we start walking toward the cafeteria. "So, what's on the menu tonight? Mac and Cheese Surprise? Burnt onion soup?"

At least she's still got her sense of humor, though it's a bit drier than it used to be.

"Ah, I look forward to showing you all the things you've missed over the past year, particularly the quality of the food."

Her eyes widen. "How can things get much better than cardboard pizza and still-frozen chicken nuggets?"

I narrow my eyes. Now she's taking it too far. "Okay, things weren't quite that bad, but you've made your point. The food was shit. Like I said, things are better now."

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

I smile, our exchange close enough to those during our past relationship that I imagine for a second that we’re back in time. Her, getting me to lighten up. Me, showing her the ropes around camp and watching joy exude from her when she learned something new.

“So, is Seattle life everything you hoped and dreamed it would be?”

Her shoulders lift then drop. “And more.”

More. The word stings, yet it’s proof that I’d done the right thing by forcing her to leave. “That’s good. I’m happy for you.”

Her eyes flicker to mine for a moment. “What about you? Are you happy?”

I’ve always hated that question. It’s such a simple question, yet impossible to answer. Am I happy today, this moment, all the time? I think I’m happy, but how does one know?

“It’s not a loaded question, Anderson.”

It’s like she can read my mind. “No, but the answer feels loaded.”

She blows out a breath and shakes her head. “Anderson Bexley, always carrying around the weight of the world on his shoulders. Someone needs to teach you how to take a load off.”

“That was always your job.” Almost as soon as I say the words, I regret them.

Too much silence follows, the ever-present tension between us thickening with all our unsaid words. “I’m surprised you haven’t found yourself another Hope by now.” She lets out a playful laugh, but I can’t help but feel like it’s a cover for something deeper. “You know what I mean,” she adds. “An annoying puppy dog always bouncing around you, latching on to your every word, and eager to run all those errands with you.” She nudges me. “Admit it. I was the best.”

“You were, in fact, the best.” My chest squeezes. “And you were never annoying.”

She rolls her eyes. “Oh, come on. I was definitely annoying. It was the first thing I realized about myself when I started my job at Urgency. I would crack a joke in a meeting, and everyone would stare at me like I was an alien.” She shakes her head as if recalling the memory. “God, that was embarrassing. It must have been all those years working with kids. The addiction of getting them to love me was real.”

I squint at her, realizing that she wholeheartedly means what she said.

“Hope, you were the highlight of those kids’ weeks. You brought in the highest compliments of any other counselor here, and”—I contemplate cutting myself off before I say too much but decide to go for it anyway —“you were the brightest part of my days. I meant it when I said you were irreplaceable.”

Her pacing slows, and she blinks back at me, surprise flashing in her eyes while my heart feels like it’s lunging into my throat. How I’m able to find the courage to say all the things I should have said when she was still here is a mystery to me, but it feels good.

Maybe I haven’t completely lost her after all.

Maybe there’s a reason she came back here.

Maybe she’s meant to stay.

I think she might say something, but she blinks again, and just like that, the surprise in her eyes fades, and she quickens her steps. “Well, then it’s a good thing Urgency sent me here to help you with your reopening. Let’s get started, shall we?”

Her business tone is almost cutting, but I realize I wouldn’t think anything of it if it were anyone else, so I follow her lead toward the cafeteria, rushing to get the door for her once we reach the entrance.

While she was settling into her cabin, I was busy setting a table and preparing our meal. Looking over at the clothed table now, embarrassment begins to set in. Maybe the dim lighting, candles, and flowers were a little inappropriate for a business dinner, but it felt right while I was putting it all together.

I pull out her chair and move around the table, immediately reaching for the bottle of wine sitting in a bucket of ice. “Wine?” I offer.

She eyes the pinot grigio hungrily. “I hope you have more where that came from.”

I chuckle and begin to pour her a glass first. “There’s another bottle being chilled now, and I’ll show you my stash later. You can help yourself whenever you want.”

She takes a sip and her eyes close as she hums against the glass like it’s the best thing she’s ever tasted. It’s such an innocent reaction, but it’s enough to awaken the beast inside me that’s longed for this woman who I never believed I could have.

“I just got hit by a reminder of the nights you, me, and Silver would sneak off to the marina late at night and drink on the dock.” Her smile is

contagious, and I find my cheeks lifting too.

“And at the campfire and in the barn,” I add.

She laughs. “And at your parents’ cabin since they were never here.” She tilts her head. “Did they ever come home?”

I shake my head, my mood souring some. Seems to happen every time the subject of my family comes up. “They’re still living up in Bellingham on a plot of land my dad bought years ago. I can’t remember the last time they’ve been back. I finally moved out of my old bedroom last year and into the master.”

Hope looks almost as surprised as I am about the whole thing. “But you said this camp was everything to your dad.”

“But not to my mom.”

“What? Silver told me that Miriam loved it here.”

I quickly pour myself a glass of wine and take a long sip. “She loved what she did, being a nurse and helping kids and all, but she didn’t like what this place brought out of my dad over time. Before he retired, the business side of things always stressed him out. He wasn’t great at managing the anger, even after he’d pretty much handed the ropes over to me. He still got too caught up in it all. When my parents first moved to Bellingham, I think they always planned to return. But after we got that big money donation and my dad knew I was handling things, I think it gave him enough peace of mind to finally focus on my mom’s happiness. So, they stayed gone.”

Hope frowns. “Was your dad’s anger the reason your brothers left?”

I shrug, the weight of the topic suddenly folding in on me. “Something like that.” I lift my glass, hoping to change the topic. “To a fresh start.”

She looks a bit taken aback by the subject change, and it takes her a second to lift her glass to mine. When she does, she’s frowning. “To a fresh start.”

An unsettled feeling churns in my gut as we’re sipping to our toast. When I set my glass down, I lock eyes with hers. “I’m not just referring to the campground. I was talking about us. It’s been a long time, but that doesn’t mean it has to be any different than it was when you lived here.”

A light laugh floats from between her lips. “Everything is different now. *I’m* different. Hell”—she sweeps her arms around—“this entire campsite is different. And you’re probably different too. There’s no use pretending we live in the past.” She straightens her spine and adopts a proud look. “I’ve matured.”

The displeased grunt that escapes my throat was supposed to stay in my head. Her eyes widen on mine. “Sorry.” I chuckle. “It’s just... you have a very low opinion of the woman you were when you lived here. It’s like you’re convinced there was something wrong with you.”

She hitches a brow. “I wouldn’t say that, but this past year has been a whirlwind, to say the least. I’ve traveled more than I have in my entire life. I’m already up for my first raise at the end of the month—my boss is even promising me a promotion if all goes well here—and I live in the *city*, Anderson.”

I squint, waiting for her to make whatever point she was aiming for. “So?”

“So,” she adds matter-of-factly, “I’ve never lived in a big city before. My apartment is three times the size of my old cabin.”

Anger rumbles in my chest. “You’re basing your success on the size of your living quarters?”

Hope’s body deflates a little, her head tilting to the side. “No, of course not. But three years ago, I never could have imagined moving to Seattle alone and working a nine-to-five job. I’m proud of myself.” Hurt registers in her eyes. “I thought you would be proud of me too.”

Now it’s my turn to deflate. “I am proud of you. It’s everything you ever wanted. I’m eager to see what you’re capable of.” I take another sip of wine, racking my brain for a way to steer the conversation to safer topics, happier memories. She beats me to it.

“Talk to me about Camp Bexley,” Hope says, straightening her posture. “Your project came with very vague details, which is unusual for what I’ve dealt with before at Urgency. Usually, we itemize each step of the timeline down to the hour. I’ll need to take your budget and work backward.”

I reach into the folder I’d set on the bench earlier and hand it to her. “You’re already familiar with the layout of the land, but there are some new structures I can show you tomorrow. A pool, an outdoor gym, a bar—”

She practically spits out her sip of wine. “Did you say a bar? When did that become part of the plan?”

“Remember that old, abandoned building we used to trek to in the woods?”

Hope nods slowly before she focuses on the folder I’ve handed her. “You turned that into a bar?”

I shrug. “A small one. I had to clear out some of that land anyway for the

resort cabins. I'm still working on getting the liquor license, but as soon as I do, I'll be hiring. It's guaranteed cash flow as long as we can keep the resort side booked up." I nod to her. "And that's why you're here. I need a strong marketing plan that can get this place up and running fairly quickly. Hence the reopening party I'd like you to help me put together."

She's still flipping through the folder as she speaks. "That shouldn't be a problem considering the contact lists we have for all the parents of the kids that have come through here. We can get some strong direct mail campaigns out there, and you won't have to purchase a single list. But your online game will have to be strong too. We can look at all of that tomorrow. As far as I can tell, you've never changed your branding."

My lips tug up at one corner. "You would be correct."

"Not even when you changed from Camp Dakota to Camp Bexley?"

I cringe and shake my head. "I wasn't sure how to smoothly make that transition without confusing our existing clients."

"No problem," she says confidently, her eyes still focused on the folder in her hands. "I can help you with that."

I continue to watch her as she rambles off a checklist of tasks as she peruses the land map. The next thing I know, she's pulling an iPad from her purse and using a stylus to scribble in it like crazy. She's lost in her own world, and it's clear she's in her element, mapping out the work ahead.

She doesn't even notice when I get up to retrieve our dinner, until I'm placing steaming hot cast-iron skillet filled with foil hiding some of her favorite foods. She freezes, and her eyes get wide. "That smells like heaven."

I smile at the compliment and begin to peel open the foil to reveal a variety of combinations. Campfire pizza, Italian flatbread paninis, steak and sweet potato hash, and—my personal favorite—campfire nachos.

Hope has always been a meat-and-potatoes girl, so I kept that in mind while preparing our miniature feast.

Moisture thickens on her lips as she practically salivates over the main course. But then I unveil the skillet cornbread and watch as her body convulses slightly at the sight. I'd never been fortunate enough to pleasure Hope in all the ways I'd imagined over the years, but her reaction now is the way I imagine she would react to my tongue ravishing her delicate places.

I release a breath, lifting myself from my very vivid daydream and settling back in the present. "Welcome to Bexley Diner, where we specialize in camp-inspired combinations, fresh off the skillet." I wink, certain she'll be

as impressed with the new menu as I am.

“I was not expecting this.” Her eyes meet mine. “You’re managing to surprise the hell out of me today, Bexley. Maybe I’m not as prepared as I thought I was.”

Something about the doubt in her words makes me panic, like I had the night I found out about the possibility that she would be leaving. Back then, I was so terrified at the thought of losing her that I’d made up my mind right then and there to let her go. I’d been through one loss after another with my brothers and parents, and I knew Hope leaving was only a matter of when. The thought of prolonging that agony twisted inside me like the spiniest vines, so I’d made the decision for her.

Now I realize the long, dark days of missing Hope can finally come to an end.

Now that she’s back.

Now that she’s here.

I won’t make that same mistake again.

“You’re more qualified than anyone else. Don’t say that.” I lean forward, wanting her to not only hear me but *see* me. “I need you, Hope. The changes to this place might be something my brothers and I dreamed up when we were kids, but you were the only one who ever believed in that dream with the same passion I once felt. The fact that you’re here when neither of us expected it is…” I dart around all the words that make the most sense for fear of scaring her away. *Fate* is the only word that keeps coming to mind.

“Silver.”

“Huh?” I ask, confused at her mention of my sister.

Hope smiles. “Silver is the reason I’m here. Obviously. She knew you needed me, and she knew how to get me here.” She shrugs. “She never thought I’d leave this place, you know. When I did, I think it surprised her more than anyone.”

I swallow, desperately wanting to rewind the last few seconds so I can say what I wanted to say instead of hiding behind my silence.

“But,” she starts again, cutting into the courage I’d been summoning, “when one door closes, another one opens, right? It was all meant to be, even if I didn’t realize it at the time.”

The way she says that so nonchalantly makes me sick inside. “I should have never forced you to go.”

Her eyes snap to mine, and for a second, I wish I’d thought to put some

music on the surrounding speakers. My thoughts become far too loud. She needs to know how sorry I am for that night and for all the silence since. Seeing her again has made me realize how much of a coward I was to push her away like that.

“I’m glad you did.” Hope’s smile that follows is easy. Too easy.

Squinting, I toy with her words in my mind. “You’re glad I threatened to fire you if you didn’t take that job?”

There’s a flash in her eyes, something deeper that she’s holding back, and then another smile. “If you hadn’t forced me off the island, I would have never gotten to experience the life I’ve lived for the past year. I should be thanking you.”

I lean back, my appetite suddenly gone. Hope, on the other hand, starts to dig in to the dishes, filling spoonfuls from each skillet onto her plate.

“Funny,” I murmur dryly. “I’ve yet to hear you thank me.”

I’m not sure that she hears me, though, because her gaze has slipped from mine, and she’s scanning the food once again.

A gasp brings my attention back to her pink lips. “Is that blackberry crumble?”

I put the foil lid back on the dish that just piqued her interest. “That’s dessert.”

“It looks and smells incredible.”

“Thanks. I picked the blackberries myself. You used to love going out to the bushes with me.”

“Did I?” She leans back in her chair and stabs a diced potato with her fork. “I don’t remember.”

Another thought comes to mind. An idea. My heart hammers in my throat. “Maybe I can jog your memory tomorrow.” I lean forward. “In fact, why don’t we take the day tomorrow to revisit your old favorites here?”

Maybe, just maybe, Hope needs a little help to jog her memory. I can already picture her eyes lighting up the way they used to the moment she spotted the wild bush growing through one of the perimeter fences. The way she ran and plucked the first berry, only to close her eyes and hum like heaven was bursting inside her mouth. And how she inevitably ended up eating more berries than she picked. My chest squeezes. How could I have ever let her go?

Hope smiles and shakes her head. “I already have an agenda for tomorrow, and blackberry picking is certainly not on it.”

Her comment dissolves the imagery alive in my mind. It feels like a slap in the face, but I know she doesn't mean it that way. Hope clearly has different priorities now, and I either need to get used to that—or help her remember her old ones.

Chapter Six

HOPE

It's still dark when I finally drag myself out of bed the next morning. After my mind and eyes adjust slightly, I realize the extra layer of dark shades are mostly to thank for my long and deep slumber. But the moment I catch sight of the time on the digital clock in the corner of the room, my eyes practically bulge out of my head.

Nine a.m.? I haven't slept past six thirty since first moving to Seattle. I'd gotten used to the groggy mornings before coffee recharged my brain, followed by a hot shower to cleanse me of my night terrors. Because while city life felt like a dream most of the time, it came with challenges I wasn't mentally prepared for. Like the constant sounds outside my window, the busy intersections that carried more traffic on foot than in the street, and the endless options of not just food but clothing and jewelry and automobiles. There was so much chaos, and since I had an already-chaotic brain, it led to many panic attacks when I first arrived in the city.

I shower and dress in a pair of navy slacks and a pale pink button-down to keep things business casual. My high heels can stay in the closet though. Instead, I reach for my brown sandals and head to the bathroom to apply my makeup.

One look at my phone on the nightstand has me sighing and remembering what I'd said to Dexter last night. He was out of line, but deep down I know that my reaction had more to do with my history with Anderson than anything. Because of that, guilt stirs in my chest as I contemplate picking up the phone.

It isn't like he hasn't emailed me half a dozen times since we'd last gotten off the phone, but I don't respond to him on email either. If I'm going to spend two weeks with Anderson Bexley, I can't be getting caught up in my

love life back home. It's too distracting. Besides? Dexter wanted to give me this time away so that I can think about what I really want to come from our office fling. Do I want more? Do I want nothing? It feels like that's the ultimatum he's giving me, which adds another layer of stress to my thoughts.

It feels like such a silly conversation to have at this point in our relationship. Things have been great. Better than great. But that's because up until this point, keeping things secret has protected me from risking my reputation at work, not to mention another heartbreak. The moment we start dating for real, everything will change. I've worked too damn hard to let that happen.

When I walk through the front doors of the main office, nostalgia hits me. Freshly brewed coffee smacks my senses in a way I hadn't expected. I can almost hear Anderson's grateful sigh when he would walk in on me waiting for that first heavenly drip. And then his sweet smile after I would hand him a cup before serving myself.

The entire scene hits differently than me rounding the corner amid downtown Seattle traffic to grab a six-dollar venti latte from the nearest coffee shop. Nothing is relaxing about that. Especially when the line is so long that I have to run the entire way back to the office while trying not to spill half my drink.

But this morning... it's Anderson who brewed the coffee, and it must be his second pot because there's no way in hell he would have waited this long to start in on his caffeine high.

"Let me guess," I say while pushing my way into the staff-room kitchen. "You've already gone on a three-mile run, swam a hundred laps, and guzzled an entire pot of coffee." I quirk an eyebrow while trying my hardest not to gawk at the gorgeous specimen in front of me. The short half-glance I took was plenty to remind me why I had such a hard time thinking of anything other than Anderson Bexley when I lived here.

He's still a tall drink of whiskey, with his golden eyes and invisible armor that wraps him like a thick coat of glass. Still top-shelf. No matter how good he may look sitting there, he's unreachable. Which is probably for the best. I just know that one sip would kill me.

"Actually, I went on a five-mile run, swam two-hundred laps, and guzzled half a pot of coffee, not a full one." He rubs his stomach over his plain white shirt and winks. "Taking it easy today."

I take the hot cup of steaming caffeine that he hands me and smile.

Warmth from the steam buzzes across my lips and heats my chest. “Sounds like it.”

His chin tips up. “What about you? Still running?”

I nod then rethink my answer and shrug. “On a treadmill. I have a gym membership, but I can’t say that it’s the same.”

“You’re welcome to join me like old times. I can show you some of the new trails I carved out.”

This time, my smile becomes pinched as I avoid his eyes. “Thanks, but I think my time is best spent working on your reopening while I’m here. Speaking of”—I look around—“where should I set up camp?”

“Set up what?”

“Camp,” I repeat then laugh when I realize why that word could be confusing. “You know, a workstation.” I shrug the shoulder holding my laptop bag. “I’d rather not work in my cabin the entire time I’m here. I guess I could use a table in here.” I look around at the staff room’s round tables and try to pick one that gives off the best vibes.

Anderson waves a hand toward the window. “There are picnic tables all around here. You could even sit at the dock of the marina if you want.”

My smile feels pinched. “I’ll need an outlet for my laptop.”

He blinks at me for a second. “I can run an extension cord.”

I make a face. “And then my laptop slips into the water and I’m shit out of luck.” I shake my head, the risk too fearful to imagine. “I think I’m better off in here.”

“You can use my office if that’s what you prefer. It’s not like I’m in there much. Hopefully you won’t be either.”

I tilt my head, finally making eye contact for the sole purpose of letting him see just how serious I am. “I’m here to work, Anderson. I’ve got an entire project budget to set up today and a team of designers waiting to start pumping out material. I’ve got project timelines to build and vendors to contact. I want Camp Bexley to be a success as much as you do.”

“Hope,” Anderson says, his head tilting, “the reason I wanted someone to be on site for this project is so that they wouldn’t be sitting behind a computer all day directing some poor marketing team. I wanted someone out there, experiencing life here, walking the trails... so that they would understand what I’m trying to promote here.”

“Right.” I press my shoulders back. “Which is why it’s great that you have me. I already know everything there is to know about this place.”

His gaze sweeps my attire before hitching a brow like he'd just made a point. "I'd say you're a little stale, Sparky."

I swear my breath seizes at the sound of his old nickname for me. It was a name he'd adopted in our first week of getting to know each other because of how energized I always seemed. And in typical fashion, I took his way of poking fun at me as an endearment. Now I know better.

"Maybe stale is the way to be." I tear my eyes from his and walk toward one of the staff-room doors that leads to a suite of offices. "If you need me, I'll be in your office."



* * *

My fingers won't stop moving across the keyboard well into early afternoon. My rumbling stomach reminds me that I failed to nourish it, and my eyes are getting blurry from nonstop screen time, but I'm far too deep into my work to quit it for anything.

I'm used to the hustle. At Urgency, there's no other way. So far today, I've put together a budget with a corresponding proposal that will undoubtedly blow Anderson's mind. Logo options, starter marketing copy, and a mile-long list of ideas for him to consider. I was even able to get my creative department back at the office to put together some mock designs to get the ball moving.

When I feel like I have enough content to present, I gather my documents and laptop and begin the hunt for Anderson. He could be anywhere at this hour, but my first guess is the stables. When he's not there, I head to the marina, the cafeteria, and the various docks around camp, until I finally end up right back where I started, inside the office. *Where the hell is he?*

"There she is."

I whip my entire body around to find Anderson rounding the corner down the hall, phone to his ear. His skin is shiny with a coat of sweat, like he was

in the middle of some laborious project. His thick, curly hair sticks to his forehead and shards of wood cover his white shirt.

Anderson was always known for his wood projects. If carving were an Olympic sport, the man would win hands down. But it's during my quick inspection of his appearance that I realize just how much Anderson has changed over the past year. I hadn't noticed before, but he's definitely bulked up some. His biceps and pecs stretch his shirt, making them impossible to hide. Not that he should. If it were the old me, I'd find any excuse to ogle the man without even trying to hide it.

That was the thing about my love for Anderson Bexley back then. I'd never felt the need to hide it, and everyone knew. Everyone but him.

At least... if he did know, he certainly didn't alter his own behavior because of it. He simply kept me close, making me his partner in crime when he ran errands around the island, asking me for special favors during our workdays, and keeping me late because "I was the only one he trusted." And I was just smitten enough to believe it would all lead to something more eventually.

We all know where eventually got me.

"It's for you."

Anderson's beefy arm extends toward me, and I realize I've been so focused on his new build that I forgot to focus on anything else. Confused, I reach for the phone without even questioning the offer. Instead, I hold the small device to my ear and say, "This is Hope."

The thick silence followed by a heavy sigh says it all. *Shit*. Dread fills me right before Dexter's deep voice grumbles over the line. "Well, hello, Miss Davies. I hear you've been hard at work today."

I clear my throat, and with a darting glance at Anderson, I pray that he can't see the ugly shade of red I probably turned. My face and cheeks are burning. Why? I don't completely know. "That I have," I say, forcing my nerves to back the fuck down. "I was getting ready to present some items to Mr. Bexley." My gaze flickers back to Anderson's to find him studying me with bent brows and a concentrated gaze. "I was planning to check in with you tonight."

"Please do," Dexter says, his firm tone already transforming into something softer. "What I said to you last night—it was awful, and I'm sorry. I was getting ready to drive to you to apologize if Bexley wasn't able to transfer me."

Panic kicks in my chest. “Don’t do that, Mr. Van Clark. I have everything under control here. I can catch you up when we speak later.”

“Looking forward to it. In fact, I’d appreciate you catching me up on those designs you worked on today with Creative.”

His dry, challenging tone gives me whiplash. One second, he’s sweet and sensitive, the next he’s putting me back on my toes.

“Sure, I was about to get Anderson’s opinion on those now. I’ll—”

“You will do no such thing.”

My mouth snaps shut at the interruption. “Excuse me?”

“You’re headed in the wrong direction. I was speaking with Denise earlier and...”

I barely hear his next words while anger bubbles in my chest. I take a step backward into the office, grip the edge of the door, and slam it closed to shut Anderson out. The entire building rattles at the force I just exuded, but I can’t control my anger enough to care much about that.

“What was that?” Dexter demands.

I ignore his question. “You spoke to my art director behind my back?” I’m seething with anger, but somehow, I manage to keep my voice low enough so that I don’t think Anderson can hear.

Dexter’s voice goes quiet, his shock filling the silence. “I think it’s me who signs her checks, so I believe you’re referring to *my* art director.”

“But it’s my project. A project you promised you would give me a chance to run on my own. Do you realize the terrible position you put me in when you question my ideas to my team?”

“Well, I wouldn’t have had to go to her in the first place if you had returned my calls.”

“That’s bullshit, Dexter. You always do this,” I hiss. “You butt into my projects and start to make all the decisions—and if it’s not you then it’s Mallory—but I’m not letting you do that this time. I was handpicked by the client to run this project. It’s what he wants. It’s what I want. You need to let me do this without interference, or—” I slam my mouth closed.

“Or what?” Dexter roars.

“Or I’ll quit.”

“That’s quite the threat from someone who lied about having a college degree.”

My entire body gets warm with embarrassment. I hadn’t lied per say, but I didn’t explain the degree I’d added to my resume was unfinished, praying

no one would be the wiser. Dexter pulled me into his office on my first day of work to tell me he knew. He was so nice that day. Telling me it wasn't my education that mattered as much as my experience, and that I would have to work ten times harder to prove myself to him, but that if I could do that, I would advance within the organization as quickly as anyone else.

I felt indebted to him that day and ever since, knowing that he had, in fact, taken a chance on me when many others wouldn't have.

"Remember who gave you your first real job," he adds, like his first zing wasn't enough. "One that has the power to make or break your career, might I add."

Is Dexter threatening to blackball me? I'm not entirely sure if that's what he's insinuating, but I wouldn't put it past him. I've seen how ruthless he can be when he feels threatened in the slightest, and I never want to be in the line of his fire. Maybe it was our careless fling that fooled me into believing that Dexter would never make me one of his targets, but after only one day away from the office, I'm starting to question everything.

I don't want to quit.

I don't want to get fired.

For once in my life, I want to see something through until the very end.

Seconds pass, maybe minutes, but when I finally release a shaky breath and my mind clears some, I'm fully aware that if Dexter and I weren't having a secret fling, he'd fire me on the spot.

"You know I love my job," I try again, my voice calmer. "You know how hard I've worked to be here today. All I'm asking for is the chance to prove that I can do this. You promised me that chance."

He blows out a breath that tells me he's conceding. Thank God. I don't think I can handle another fight with Dexter while I'm here. It's hard enough as it is being around Anderson.

"You're right."

Two words. They're enough that I can take a deep breath. "Do you mean that?"

"Yes, Hope. You've earned this. I was angry and missing you, and I'm sorry. I won't butt in again."

"You won't?" I'm so relieved, I could cry.

"No, I won't. You have my word. But you have to give me your word that you'll stop being furious with me. I can't think straight when you're like this. And you're too far away for me to punish you."

My cheeks heat again, this time for an entirely different reason. I'm so grateful to keep my job and that he's trusting me with another chance that all my fury toward him dissolves. "I'll call you tonight."

"Looking forward to it, Miss Davies." His voice practically purrs before I hear the click of the line and I bring the phone down from my ear.

It's only then that I remember it's Anderson's phone in my hand. The home screen is visible, and so is a folder titled Hope.

Curiosity nibbles away at me for too many seconds before I break down and tap the folder, exposing the contents—endless photos of me. I click through them, one after the other, my chest squeezing at every frame of some of my best memories, some of which had slipped away.

Sometimes it's hard for me to imagine those three incredible years and just how much I loved them. It was like I was on permanent vacation when even the hardest days felt like such a blessing. But that's all Camp Bexley was—a vacation from the real world, a stepping-stone to who I was destined to become. And Anderson was nothing but a naive fantasy—a link to the world I wanted to believe I could belong in forever, when nothing could be further from the truth.

Then why does he have a folder of photos of you?

"Hope, you off the phone?"

I jump at Anderson's voice on the other side of the door and close the folder then leap forward. "Yup, one second. Sorry, I had to send a quick email."

I open the door, the gorgeous sight of Anderson Bexley hitting me once again. "Thank you for letting me borrow that." I slip the phone into his hands and push out a smile. "Mine is dead, so he wanted to check in on things."

"Everything okay?"

I nod a little too eagerly. "Yup."

The deep crease between Anderson's eyebrows tells me he doesn't believe me. "Did you say you had something you wanted to present to me?"

I let out a laugh and shake my head. Even though I put my foot down with Dexter, it's too late. My insecurities are running rampant. "I'm going to need a day to look at those again before I present, if that's okay." I bite down on my bottom lip, hoping he doesn't question me any further.

Anderson nods. "Sure, on one condition."

I wasn't expecting that. "O-okay. What's that?"

"Come with me somewhere."

“Where?”

Anderson slips his phone into his pocket and takes a step away from his office. “You’ll see.”

Chapter Seven

ANDERSON

Ever since Hope stepped foot back into camp, I've struggled with how different she seems. I've questioned whether those changes are temporary or permanent. Or if it's all just a mask belonging to a costume she thinks she needs to wear to exist in this new world of hers. After spending the entire day trying to work it all out in my head, I'm only more confused than before. So I decided to approach it differently.

"Where are we going, Anderson? I need to get back to work at some point today."

We're deep in the woods, off the man-made trails. We've only been hiking for ten minutes, but I suppose that can feel like a long time to someone who's lost their sense of patience.

"We're almost there."

"Where?" she growls, and I can't help but chuckle. The sound is almost unrecognizable coming from her.

Hope had never been a growler. She was the prime example of an optimist. Always reminding the rest of us of the positives in every situation. She lived up to her name, and it's one of the many reasons I always felt myself gravitating toward her. I couldn't even leave to go on an errand without asking her to come along because it would be so boring without her chatting off my ear. It didn't even matter what she was telling me. Most of the time, it was the camp gossip that got her talking a million miles an hour. And I'd let her, listening to every single word like they were my bible. She made it easy. She made it fun. And God, do I miss that woman.

"Do you remember that old shed behind the clearing we use as a field?"

Hope's laugh is light and airy, causing a squeeze in my chest at the warm familiarity. "Of course. It was your favorite hideout, but everyone knew

when you were there. Your power tools were so loud, and you made the coolest stuff.”

I roll my eyes. “Right, which you know because you and Silver would sneak inside when you thought I wasn’t looking.”

She gazes back at me, amused. “If you knew, why didn’t you stop us?”

I shrug. “It became part of the fun of it all, I guess. I loved to create things, but I never had the guts to show anyone. I liked that you two were curious.”

Hope’s teeth sink down into her bottom lip, and I can’t help but wonder if she tastes and feels the same. It only took one kiss, one night, and I knew I’d never be the same. I still replay that night in my head, especially from the moment I slipped into bed beside her until right before I spouted cruel words. I replay her kiss, her soft sighs, her gentle touch, and the way her warm body felt against mine.

My regrets from that night nearly destroyed me, but it’s those safe moments in between that bring me back to life.

“Well, in Silver’s defense, she would have never snuck inside if it weren’t for her trying to drag me out.” She tilts her head. “What did you do with the shed?”

“I’m taking you to it now,” I finally reveal. “My old shop got demolished when I created the new cabins, so I decided to put something deeper in the woods where the sounds wouldn’t raise any complaints.”

Almost as soon as I’m done talking, a white aluminum shack with a bright-green roof comes into view. Understanding registers on her face. “Isn’t it hard to lug things back and forth from here?”

I shake my head. “Nah. If I need to transport anything, I can use a boat.” I point through the woods to where a dock sits. “We’re not too far from the water on the opposite side of camp. You may have never been this far out before.”

She looks around, scoping out our surroundings. “It’s so peaceful out here.”

That it is. Daylight streams through the brightly colored leaves, but other than that, it’s shady in this part of the woods, providing an added chill to the autumn air, making for a cozy setting.

The scent of fresh sawdust gets stronger the closer we get. When I open the door to the shack to let her enter, I’m simultaneously watching her face like an addict ready for that first hit. Her reaction doesn’t disappoint.

Her eyes grow wide, and her mouth parts slightly. She scans the room slowly, as though she's committing it all to memory. When she's done, she turns to me and shakes her head. "It's like a freaking museum in here."

She starts to walk around the room, checking out the old wood shelves filled with all the items I've carved over the years, from animal sculptures to portraits to furniture. I walk over to the creation I just finished sanding this morning. "I had this crazy idea to make one of these for all the new cabins. It's a porch swing bed."

She approaches and runs her fingers along the smoothed-out wood. "That doesn't sound crazy at all. It's gorgeous, Anderson. I had no idea you could create something this"—she appears to be struggling to find the right word—"functional."

A chuckle bubbles up from deep inside me because I know exactly what she means. "It's different than the totems and picture frames I used to design, I guess."

"How long did this take you?"

I make a face, slightly embarrassed of the answer. "A couple weeks but only because I was figuring it all out. I'll get faster."

She nods. "You will. All you need now are some custom cushions to fit. Have them wrapped in different fabric to give them each a unique look, and I think it's the perfect selling touch." She folds her arms and walks around the bed, inspecting every detail. "You should put this one up in front of my cabin. We can take some marketing photos and add them to some of the material I'm creating for you."

I open my mouth to argue, feeling caught off guard by the one-eighty turn in conversation.

"What do you think?" she pushes.

"Um, yeah, sure."

Her brows bend together. "What's wrong?"

I shake my head, knowing I should bite my tongue, but I can't. "Nothing, I just wasn't expecting you to go straight to marketing speak."

The crease between her brows deepens. "Isn't that why you brought me out here?"

I search her eyes, wondering if she's that far gone from the girl I used to know. "I've never shown anyone this place before. You used to be so curious, I thought it was something you'd want to check out."

Realization relaxes her face, and a sigh blows past her lips. "I'm sorry. I

didn't think..." She shakes her head. "I assumed you wanted me to incorporate this into the material somehow."

Disappointment burrows deep down in my chest, and I wish it wasn't like this. I wish I wasn't expecting to get something more from Hope than she's willing to give. But I can't stop missing the woman who stayed in my heart long after she left. I can't stop wishing that it was my old Hope who came back, and not this replica, this imposter.

Frustration twists its way through me. "Never mind." I push out a smile. "I don't know what I was thinking. Let's get you back to the office."

I head back to the entrance and place my hand on the light switch when I realize she's not following. One glance over my shoulder tells me all I need to know. Her hands are folded and she's glaring.

"C'mon Hope. Let's go."

"No."

Anger kicks in my chest. "No?" Hope may be different in many ways, but she's still stubborn as all hell.

"Not until we have it out, once and for all. I'm not going to spend the next two weeks tiptoeing around you because of all the things we haven't said. Let's say them. Right here. Right now, Anderson. Because you seem to think we can go right back to where we left off, and I thought I made it clear when I first got here, that isn't going to happen."

Her words feel cutting, final, and my nod comes instinctively even though the last thing I want to do is agree. I want to do exactly what she refuses to do. I want to go back. And this time, I want to be selfish. Because if I ever had the chance to rewrite that last night we had together, I would have never let her go.

She starts to storm past me, but I grab her hand and tug her back toward me. "Wait."

She pulls free and folds her arms across her chest. "Why? What's the point?" It's like her old optimism has converted into a ball of stress and anger, and it's billowing off her in waves.

"The point is that I'm trying to find the girl I used to know. I miss her. What happened to you? You were always so happy and playful before. Now, you talk about nothing but work and how much greater your life is in the city than it was here."

Her eyes widen in surprise as she takes a step toward me, nostrils flaring. "First of all, I'm a woman, not a girl. I think that's something you've always

seemed to overlook.” She takes another step in my direction, closing the final gap between us. “Second, you don’t get to miss the people you push away. That’s where you’ll need to start taking a little bit of responsibility. Third, maybe I am happier. Life in the city might be more stressful, but at least I’m happy.”

“You were happy here.”

“You seemed to think I wasn’t. That’s why you kicked me out of camp, wasn’t it?”

Emotion balls its invisible fist and socks me in the gut. “You know it wasn’t like that. Yes, I pushed you to leave, but I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought that’s what you wanted. You would have never left here on your own. You said so yourself just yesterday.”

She shakes her head and averts her gaze. “And I meant what I said, but it still wasn’t your choice to make.”

“I’m sorry, Hope. Jesus. I did it for you, okay? So that you could be happy.”

“But I *was* happy. I loved this camp. I loved...”

My heart beats faster when she stops and shakes her head like she’s rethinking her words.

“I loved everything about it. This place was the only true home I’d ever known. And the way you ripped it away from me was so incredibly cruel. You asked me yesterday where I went all those weeks we had off, when the staff would disappear and you’d be left here all alone. Do you still want to know where I went?”

The vise around my heart clamps down harder. “Yes.”

Her eyes search mine for a few seconds before settling. “The truth is, I never left.” Moisture forms in her eyes. “I had nowhere to go. So, right before camp closed every season, I’d stock up on supplies and hide out in my cabin until everyone got back. You never even asked why my car was still here.”

My mind is spinning while my every breath seems to catch in my throat, rendering me speechless. My cheeks flame from anger, betrayal, horror—I’m not even quite sure what I’m feeling aside from shock at her confession. She can’t be serious. “I figured you carpooled like everyone else. I didn’t think —”

“This was my only home, and you took it away without a second thought. I never dreamed you were capable of hurting me that way.”

My chest deflates and caves in around my heart. I didn't realize how badly I needed Hope's forgiveness until this moment. I don't think I can breathe without it. Without her. But what she just confessed... I'm not so sure that I deserve her forgiveness anymore.

"I'm so sorry," I choke out. "I had no idea."

"You never cared enough to notice."

Her accusation is terribly false, but I'm aware of my faults and just how hurtful my silence can feel to those close to me. "I cared more than you'll ever know. I still do. I'm sorry I never knew how to show you that, and if I had known that you—"

"It doesn't matter." She swipes at the moisture forming in her eyes. "None of it matters anymore. I only told you so that you would stop trying to make something out of what never was. My reasons for being here are entirely different now, and I'm asking you to respect that so we can both continue moving forward in peace."

No. There's no moving forward, not when she's headed down the opposite path from me. I can't stop myself from reaching out and grabbing the loose fabric of her shirt. It feels stiff in my grasp, but I need the leverage her to bring her closer to me. It's like this magnetic reaction I always seem to feel in her presence, only this time I'm not fighting the pull. I can't lose her again, no matter what it takes. "You're right. About everything." I bend down to touch my forehead to hers. "I was cruel, and I forced you to leave when it was the last thing I wanted you to do. I've never wanted anyone to stay more."

Her confused eyes flicker to mine. "Don't say that."

My hands slide from her shirt fabric to her waist, and I pull her closer. She doesn't resist. "It's true. I came to your room that night to tell you to stay. I was so angry when I found out you were interviewing for that job, but after talking to you, after holding you, after kissing you—"

"Stop." Her voice is choked, flooded with pain, as she pushes away from me, revealing a crater of distance between us—a void so deep and dark, and I know it was me who created it. "Please, just stop."

A mixture of anger, frustration, and deep sadness sweep through me like a tornado. "And what? Move on like we never existed?"

"Yes, because we never did." She stands straighter, her chin lifted with determination. "And moving on is what you forced me to do last year, and I've built an entire life since because of it. So I'm sorry that you have regrets,

Anderson Bexley, but I'm not here for you to make amends. It's far, far too late for that."

With that, she takes another step away before pivoting and heading straight back out the doors, into the woods, and back toward camp, while I crumble into a heap of sawdust and sadness.

Chapter Eight

HOPE

Back when Anderson and I first started getting to know each other years ago, after our initial awkward meetings, we formed a unique bond that always seemed to straddle some faint line between friendship, work, and something more.

I made it my goal to bring out his smile, and in return, he gave me hope. Whether he knew it or not, Anderson became my hero in a sense. And I hated seeing him sad. He'd put on a good front for guests and staff, but I watched him from afar, spying on his quiet moments when he didn't realize anyone was watching.

It was difficult for me to understand that a man as handsome and successful as Anderson could appear so lonely. The least I could do for him was bring him joy. Which is why the first time I ever saw him struggle with a hard decision, I muttered two words that got his attention.

"No regrets."

"What did you say?" Anderson turned to me, his frown deepening.

"I said, no regrets." I pointed at the tropical fruit in his hands. "You're eyeing that thing like you don't know whether to stab it to death or sink your teeth into it. Whatever you choose, you better own it."

He chuckled and dropped the knife in his other hand. "I've never eaten a mango before. Have you?"

His curiosity was so adorably attractive. It wasn't the first time my heart beat for Anderson Bexley, but it was the first time he'd spoken so much as a word to me without Silver being there.

"I have and they're delicious."

He studied the yellow and pink skin of the fruit again. "No regrets," he muttered, before picking up the knife and cutting out a section of juicy fruit.

He popped it into his mouth, his beautiful golden eyes widening at the first burst of flavor.

My mouth watered as I watched his wet lips move together, dreaming of kissing them just so I could experience this first with him. I wanted to taste what he tasted. I wanted to lick his lips clean then kiss him like there was no tomorrow.

When his eyes landed back on mine, he grinned. “Definitely no regrets there.”

From then on, that became our secret mantra, our inside joke. Kind of like a secret handshake with an unspoken rule to never look back on our paths in life.

No regrets.

That was our oath.

Our promise.

But what I didn’t know was just how many regrets Anderson Bexley had... and that one day I would become one of them.

The next morning brings a heavy weight with it. I can feel the burden on my shoulders, pressing against my chest and in my aching bones. I couldn’t sleep. Not when my conversation with Anderson replayed like a broken record, round and round in my heart and mind. It should have felt good standing up for myself the way I had, but I feel haunted by feelings that seem to be resurfacing through all the cracks I left behind.

He may have hurt me deeply, but I can’t get over just how broken of a man he’s become. There’s still that part inside me that wants to ignore my own pain and fix his, but I’m not even sure where it all comes from anymore. I’ve always known that whatever rift he had with his family affects him deeply, but I’m starting to think there’s so much more to his story than he ever let on.

I pass through the staff room on my way to the office, noting the bright lights and full pot of coffee. Anderson has already made his way through here. I figure he’s long gone in an effort to avoid me at all costs after last night, but then I push my way into his office and find a giant bouquet of dark-red roses sitting on the desk.

My heart hammers against my ribs, and my pulse immediately rockets in surprise. Anderson always had a sweet and sensitive side, but never in all the time I’ve known him would I have expected something like this. My chest tightens, and emotion crawls up my throat. How in the hell am I supposed to

stay mad at Anderson after this?

With a little growl and a giddy smile, I take a seat at my desk and get straight to work. I run back through the designs Dexter seemed to despise yesterday and make a few tweaks. When I'm satisfied, I begin to comb through the Camp Bexley website and social-media pages to map out a game plan.

Focus comes much easier today, despite my lack of sleep, and my coffee is an added booster to the fuel that pumps through me until well into the afternoon.

By five o'clock, my task list for the day is complete. The only thing left to do is find Anderson and start getting his feedback. I fight off the disappointment that comes when I realize he hasn't once come to check on me today. After giving me the flowers, I was certain that he would.

I'm about to give up waiting for him when I hear feet padding down the hall. I hop out of my seat and smooth my pale-pink dress down to my knees.

"Hey," I say the moment he comes into view.

He's already frowning in typical Anderson fashion. "Your lunch is still sitting in the staff room. Didn't you get my text?"

I look down and spot my phone then bat my eyes back at him. "It's off. I do that sometimes when I'm trying to focus." I tilt my head. "You brought me lunch?"

"Well, yeah," he says, his brows heavy. "Feeding you is kind of in the contract. And I didn't know if you ended up eating last night."

I wave a hand away, not wanting to go back to that dark memory. "It's okay. I had coffee and a banana this morning and was so into what I was doing, I didn't even think about food." My stomach rumbles, and I laugh. "Until now."

Anderson almost smiles. I can feel it even though his expression is still downturned. "I'm headed to the cafeteria now. I can deliver something to your room if you'd rather eat there."

Panic kicks in my chest. "Can't I eat with you?"

Shock registers on his face. "Of course. I just thought..." His eyes flicker to the bouquet of two dozen long-stemmed roses still sitting on my desk, and his expression changes. "I almost forgot about those."

"What do you mean you almost forgot?" I laugh. "They're beautiful, Anderson. Thank you."

He opens his mouth, closes it again, and then his frown deepens. "Those

aren't from me, Hope. Now, I wish they were, but it wasn't me. They were delivered early this morning."

Embarrassment sweeps me under its riptide as a new realization dawns on me—a possibility I never once considered. Dexter.

I reach into the roses, and my fingers immediately touch a card I hadn't thought to look for earlier. And then another realization hits me. I never thought they could be from Dexter because I desperately wanted them to be from Anderson.

Wow. What a complete and utter fool I am.

The note is simple, just signed with Dexter's scribbly name that I recognize from the hundreds of documents I've watched him sign over the past year. And then I turn back to Anderson, the giddiness I'd felt minutes before now morphing into embarrassment.

I let out a laugh and shake my head. "I'm sorry. How silly of me. Of course these aren't from you. You're not exactly a hearts-and-flowers kind of guy, are you?" I laugh, trying to cover up my humiliation, but it only feels like it's getting worse.

"I sure as hell would never buy you roses."

My eyes snap to his. "Wow. You're really laying it on thick today, aren't you?"

He scrunches his face. "That's not what I meant. I always thought you were more of a hydrangea kind of girl."

The fact that he thinks he knows me so well makes me want to show him just how much I've changed. "I guess it depends on the occasion. Hydrangeas are pretty and fun, but roses are elegant and beautiful and romantic."

"Romantic, huh? So, then who are they from?"

My brain churns with all the possible explanations. The one thing I can't tell him is the truth. He can't find out I'm sleeping with my boss. He just can't. And telling him the man who sent them is a fling who wants more, but I've yet to make up my mind, doesn't sound right either. I don't even want to know what Anderson would think of me if he knew the truth.

Anderson shifts, bringing my attention back to him. "Is it a secret?"

"Does it matter?" I snap.

He shrugs, not at all affected by my drastic mood change. "I'm curious, that's all."

Choosing a different approach, I pluck a rose from the bunch and bring it to my nose while meeting his eyes in a challenging stare. "I suppose my

boyfriend misses me, is all.” The lie feels bitter on my tongue, because while Dexter is the only one I’ve been with over the last few months, we have yet to take that official next step.

Anderson’s expression morphs into shock, confusion, and what might be dread. “Your boyfriend?”

“Is the idea of me having a boyfriend that surprising?”

“No, but you haven’t mentioned him.”

I shrug and stick the rose back into the vase. “It hasn’t come up.”

He blinks at me, face blank, stare unwavering. “Then tell me about him now. What does he do? Does he treat you well? How long has it been?”

I hold a hand up like I can control the rate at which he’s firing questions. “Whoa there, Bexley. Your curiosity is a little overbearing.”

He glares back at me like he isn’t taking no for an answer. “C’mon, Hope. Who is this guy?”

I shake my head. “Nope. We’re not doing this. It doesn’t even matter.”

He raises his brows as though I gave him an answer to his rapid-fire questions. “Then it must not be serious if you don’t like talking about him.”

I fold my arms and narrow my lids. “As a matter of fact, it’s very serious. We’ve been seeing each other for months now, and he’s... he’s very”—I swallow hard—“charming.”

The tan on Anderson’s face seems to fade some. “I see. And he makes you happy?”

“Very.” My words are quick and as convincing as possible.

“Well, if he makes you happy, then I guess I’m happy for you.”

The coldness in his tone doesn’t evade me, but pain still strikes my chest. I wish I was numb to these reactions by now, but I’m clearly just as vulnerable to them as I was when I lived here. “Thank you,” I tell him, my voice weaker than it had been moments ago. I clear my throat and straighten my posture, deciding to do the only thing I know how to do to avoid my real emotions.

Work.

“Since you’re here, I’d like to show you a few things.”

Anderson studies me for a second before dropping into a chair and folding his arms across his chest. “All right. Let’s do it.”

He seems to be playing into the whiplash conversation as I am, which feels like a relief after our last exchange. I drop into the chair beside him and open my laptop on the desk. I take him through the logo options, layout and

design updates for his website, and then the solid social-media calendar I mapped out to start getting the word out.

He's a good sport, paying attention to all the options while ultimately letting me make all the decisions. It's the typical Anderson and Hope way. Before long, the tension in the air has settled some.

"I'm going to head to the cafeteria. Still want to join?"

The way he asks it, like he has to, makes me rethink my earlier request to join him. Finally, I settle on my response. "I'll heat something up in the staff room and head back to my cabin. It's been a long day, and I'm pretty tired."

Anderson looks beat down, like he'd used up all his energy fighting with me earlier, and now he's exhausted too. "All right." He takes one last look at the roses and lifts from the chair. "Until tomorrow then."

I nod, watching him walk away. "Until tomorrow," I whisper.

Chapter Nine

ANDERSON

The rest of the week only gets more difficult. A selfish, stubborn, idiotic part of me thought that Hope coming back to camp was a sign from the gods—that this was where she was meant to stay, and that while she'd forgotten her laugh, I could find a way to bring it back.

They say that if you love something, then set it free. If it comes back to you, then it's yours forever. But Hope is right. I hadn't even given her a choice in the matter. To top it off, I took away her home. What I did wasn't heroic—or out of love. The way I'd pushed her away was selfish and unfair.

After yesterday, my feelings of regret for letting her go increased tenfold. Not only had she moved on to a new city and a new job but to a new boyfriend too. She's made a new life for herself, where she's successful and clearly cherished by a man who isn't me. I only have myself to blame, because while I keep telling myself that she seemed so much happier before she left, I'm beginning to realize that I'm fooling myself.

Maybe it's not Hope's stressful job holding her back from her happiness. Maybe it's me.

For the past year, I've held on so tightly to the memories of us, when my drab world felt the brightest, that I didn't even stop to think that maybe her brightest memories were right here with me.

Sometimes life gets so heavy that I forget what I'm fighting for. What's the point in this uphill battle when it was never my dream alone? Once upon a time, my brothers were just as much in love with this place as me. And then in the blink of an eye... everything changed.

I run a hand over the shiny, dark coat of the newest thoroughbred at the ranch. I won him at an auction after his last derby where he was set to retire. It was his energy that won me over. For a seventeen-year-old horse, he still

had a ton of spunk—just not enough to win another race for the owners, apparently. So I bought him, acclimated him to his new home, and visit him from time to time when I need a good pick-me-up.

“He’s beautiful.”

I look over my shoulder to find Hope, stunning as ever, walking toward me. She’s wearing another casual business pantsuit that makes me want to strip her down to nothing, for reasons other than my suppressed sexual fantasies. I want to see the old, carefree Hope come out to play in her black leggings, tall boots, and loose-fitting, long tops. Because even while I’m fighting desperately against the idea that she’s changed for good, I can’t stop wanting the old Hope back.

Her gaze is locked on the four-legged beauty in front of me, her eyes filled with wonder.

She stops beside me and runs her small hand down his mane. “I’ve never seen this one before. What’s his name?”

My hesitation stretches a few seconds while I squeeze my eyes shut, embarrassment flowing through me. “Sparky.”

I can feel her eyes on me, but the tension breaks as soon as her laugh enters the air. “You gave my nickname to a horse?”

I make a cringe face and slowly open my eyes to peer back at her. “Because of his energy. He reminded me of you in a strange way. Besides, I didn’t know you would ever meet him.”

She’s smiling as she runs her hand along his coat. “You really did miss me, Bexley, didn’t you?”

My sigh releases in a long stream as my gaze settles on her. There’s no need to beat around the bush any longer. I feel like the other day was the turning point for that. Now, all we can do is find a way to move forward. “I did.”

Her eyes sparkle with amusement. “And the best way you could cope with the loss is by purchasing a new friend?”

I bite down on my lip to pinch back a smile while glaring. “Something like that. Sparky here has been good company.”

“Would it be strange to say that I’m flattered?”

I release my lip and let one side of my mouth tip up. “Maybe, but I always did love your optimism.”

“Yeah,” she says while turning to face me. “Because you had none. You always needed a helpful reminder that the world wasn’t going to fall apart if

you stopped controlling every little damn thing.”

She’s right. She’s always right.

“So, what brings you out to the stables today? It’s not even noon. Don’t tell me you’re actually taking a break.” I gasp in mock surprise, and she laughs.

“Funny, but no. Creative made those updates you requested, and I wanted to show you.”

I raise my brows. “But you didn’t bring your computer.”

She shrugs, her eyes searching mine. “To be honest, I didn’t know if I’d find you. It’s been three days, Anderson. You just kind of disappeared. I worked through the weekend. If it weren’t for the unlocked office doors and your award-winning morning brew, I would have been worried.”

“Well, there’s no need for that. I’ve been giving you time to work. It’s why you’re here, right?”

She nods, her eyes falling to the ground then back up to me. “You avoiding me, Bexley?”

Part of me wants to tell her whatever she needs to hear to live her happiest life, but that would be dishonest. Also, avoiding Hope would be impossible when she’s the only thing on my mind. I’ve tried, but it’s only made things worse. Instead, I watch her come and go from afar. I make sure she has plenty of coffee and food to get her through the days. I leave a cold bottle of wine for her in the staff fridge. And I always check that she gets to her cabin safely at night. I don’t need to be right by her side to make sure she’s safe.

“Isn’t it easier that way? Instead of battling through the ever-present tension between us, I figured you’d be happier if I let you be.”

Pain lances across her expression. “You’re trying to do it again. Making decisions for me that aren’t yours to make.” She shifts her stance and takes a deep breath. “Look, we clearly have a history, but I don’t want the rest of my time here to be like this. With you living in the past and me in the future.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“I think we should find some middle ground. Somehow. I’ll stop making my days all about work if you promise to stop hiding behind all this regret you carry around.”

I frown. “My life is filled with regret, Hope. I’m afraid that’s an impossible request.”

She tilts her head, her eyes imploringly gazing into mine. “That’s so

confusing to me. I know so much about you—your favorite foods and colors, what makes you tick, what makes you smile and laugh—but I don't understand all this weight you carry around for everyone in your life. You're so damn hard on yourself. Why?"

"Because there's no one else. It's just me. Everyone leaves," I say. Sparky chooses that moment to trot off, leaving Hope and me alone beside the worn, white fence. "See?"

It's meant as a joke, but it doesn't sound the way I wanted it to.

She doesn't laugh at my joke either. "I want to know why you see things the way you do. Why do you insist on being so damn lonely?"

"I get why you think that I push everyone away, and maybe that's how I come across, but that's never my intention."

Her eyes are pleading, desperate for any crumb I'm willing to throw her way. "Help me understand."

I place my hand on the top rail and look out at the pasture. The stables are always quiet, not only during the off weeks. I find peace while spending time with the horses—exercising them, grooming them, and letting them free to graze in the pasture. But it's not where I'd choose to spend my days if my brothers and I had executed our childhood plan.

"You know how much I love this camp, but it wasn't just me who loved this place years ago. My brothers and I had a dream, a plan. And it all felt so perfect. We were all so different, yet our passion felt like glue when we'd come together and map what we saw in this place."

"Different how?"

"I was the creator of us all, for sure. I think that's why I was able to draw up the visions we all had for this place and attempt to bring it to life. And it's why I love woodworking."

Hope smiles and nods. "Yeah, I can see that."

"While Jamison," I continue, "was the analytical one. He had so many logical ideas on how to increase profit margins and all that shit. In our dream world, he was supposed to make all the financial decisions for the camp. That's not my area of expertise. Hence why I almost fucked everything up and drove this place into the ground after he left."

"You're too hard on yourself," she says softly. "What's Jamison doing now?"

"He started his own gig as a financial analyst for a bunch of corporate companies in Seattle, and it's absolutely fitting." I roll my eyes to the sky

when I think about Jamison in his expensive suit sitting in his high-rise Seattle building. The complete opposite of life here. Perhaps that's why it stung so badly when I found out Hope wanted to move to Seattle. It felt like rejection all over again.

"And your other brothers?"

"Cayson was the explorer, always sneaking off into the woods and doing some crazy stunts on the boat. He's a pilot in the Air Force now, living his biggest dream. But it was Benson who was always the horse whisperer." I nod out at the pasture. "He learned to ride before he could even walk, and as he grew older, he was an all-star at the Bexley family rodeos we used to put on. I always joked that he would have lived in the barn if my parents had let him. No one argued. And no one tended to the herd like he did. He loved those horses like they were family. Hell, he might have loved them even more than our family."

Hope frowns. "I don't get it. It sounds like everyone loved it here so much. They must miss it."

The way she gazes up at me, so hopeful, is yet another reminder of just how much I've missed her all these months. She's the only one who has ever made me feel as if the way things are now doesn't have to be the way it ends. There's still a chance. "I don't know how they could miss something that burnt to the ground the way it did."

"Because of your dad?"

I suck in a deep breath and blow it out slowly. "Yes and no. My dad was only trying to cope like the rest of us. But his method of coping was to go harder on all of us, like he was trying to toughen us up so that we could withstand pain like the one we suffered through."

Hope frowns. "What happened?"

Her voice is so gentle, filled with a level of concern I don't deserve. The darkness in my head swells like a fog, clouding my thoughts like it does every time I think of what I'd lost. What we'd all lost.

"Twelve years ago was a happier time—when there were five of us brothers, not four."

"What?" Hope asks, surprised. "But you and Silver never mentioned anyone else." It's like the realization is setting in while she's talking.

I swallow back the pain of our family's tragic past. "Silver came along two years later. By then, we felt like not saying a whole lot was the way to move past it, so she didn't know much. Just that Tyson was Benny's twin."

Everything goes quiet, and I have to look away from Hope in order to get the words out. I've never told anyone this story before. "Benny and Ty." I smile at hearing myself say their names. "They were fifteen, and I was twenty-four, working at the camp full time. Jamison was nineteen, and following in my footsteps, and Cayson was thirteen." I take another breath, trying to give myself a mental pep talk to rip off the bandage. "Dad was on Benson's ass one day about helping out more instead of riding all damn day. Benny was so upset about it. He, more than any of us, hated disappointing our dad. He came to me and asked if he could skip school so he could make up for some of the work he'd gotten behind on, and I didn't have the heart to tell him no. And of course, when Benny skipped school, Ty had to skip too. They were attached at the hip, those two. When one did something, the other had to follow. We all had a tight bond, but those two had something extra special."

Jesus, this is hard. My throat feels tight with my next swallow, so I take another minute to collect myself. "It was my responsibility to make sure they got their asses to school every day because mom's nurse job started too early and dad was always too deep into his work to focus on the younger boys. So, when dinner time came around and the boys still weren't back, I went to the stables to look for them. They were nowhere to be found, and their horses were missing."

Hope sucks in a breath and grips my hand. "Oh no."

I shake my head and kick my toe into the dirt. "Nah, I was livid and swore that as soon as I found those boys, I was going to knock them both to the ground. I vowed to never let them skip school again. In the two hours I spent looking for them in the dark, I made a list of all the chores they'd have to do for the next month to make it up to me. But when I found them, Ty was already gone."

Hope squeezes my hand. "No."

"Worst day of my life." I dart a glance at Hope, whose eyes are red and glistening with unshed tears. I'd cry myself if my tears weren't lodged somewhere between my chest and my throat.

"What happened to him?"

It doesn't feel like she's prying when she asks, and I appreciate that she gives me time to answer. "Ty's horse got spooked by a deer. He got thrown and—I'll save you the gory details, but nothing I did brought him back. And it was all my fault."

Hope's mouth opens, and she shakes her head as a tear slips down her cheek. "What? No, Anderson. How could you possibly think that? It was a horrific accident, but you're not to blame."

A sarcastic chuckle creeps up the back of my throat. "That's where you're wrong. I was the oldest. I was responsible for Ty and Benny not getting to school. I should have told Benny no and dragged their asses there, and we'd all still be here today."

My chest feels battered from the emotional punches I deliver every time I remotely think about the events of that day. But everything that unfolded after almost feels worse. We were broken. Our family destroyed. And I'm still here, still trying to fix the mess I brought on us all.

"That's heavy and so heartbreaking." Her voice is choked. "I can't even imagine what that must have been like, but I hate that you blame yourself."

I shake my head, fighting off the darkness that always washes over me when I think about that time directly after my brother's passing. Nothing felt real. The earth kept spinning, time kept ticking, but the quake that split our foundation was too deep, too widespread.

"It was like we all died a little that day. Together or apart, none of us has been the same. When Silver came along two years later, she was like a patch to a wound that would never heal. I think we all tried, some more than others. But Benson definitely struggled the most."

Hope tightens her hold on my hand. "Where is he now? You mentioned what your other brothers are doing but not him."

I shrug and swallow, my mind trying to remember the last time I heard from or about him. "I wish I knew. His phone is never on. He doesn't return texts or calls. He's a transient. Drives from city to city in his van, hikes for days on end. He hasn't been back since the day he turned eighteen. Didn't even finish high school."

"He'll be back."

Hope's optimism normally makes me rethink my own ideas and assumptions, but not this time. This is one problem she can't find the light in, no matter how hard she'll try.

"C'mon. You can't possibly believe that. He's been gone for nine years."

"I do believe it, and you do too. It's why you work so hard to keep this camp alive. It's why you work the stables even though it's the last thing you want to be doing. It's why you're trying to reinvent this place to be closer to what you all dreamed about." She steps in front of me and places her hands

on my waist, staring up into my eyes. “I see you, Anderson Bexley. I see your heart, and I see your intentions. What you’re doing is beautiful, and they’ll see it too. If you build it, they will come, isn’t that right?”

I smile at the old reference to one of our favorite movies. “You might be onto something.”

Hope returns my smile and tightens her hold around my waist, the closeness of her almost making me forget everything that happened before this point. Her gentle touch, her cozy vanilla scent, her full pouty lips close enough to devour with a simple bend of my body. What I’d done to deserve her arms around me is a mystery I never want to solve. I just want her.

“Have you thought about calling them?” she asks. “I know talking’s not your thing, but sometimes people need to hear that you love and miss them.”

“Is that what I should have done with you?” I ask, catching the widening of her eyes at the subject change. “Should I have called?” *Should I have confessed how much I love you?*

The sad look in her eyes breaks my heart. “You should have done a lot of things, Bexley. The point is you need to try with your brothers. They’re your family.”

“And you’re just as important to me.”

Her eyes squeeze shut, and she shakes her head. “This isn’t about me. Anyway, why are you finally telling me all this now?”

“I guess because I have nothing else to lose.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Nah, I think I’m done keeping quiet. That’s all I seem to do anymore, and you know what? It gets me nowhere. So this time, I’m going to tell it how it is, and you’re going to listen.” I bend down slightly so our foreheads are only an inch apart. “I fucked up. I hurt you. And the weight of my regret over causing that pain is my burden to bear for the rest of my fucking life. But you belong here, Hope, just as much as I do. This is your home, and I’ll make it my mission to remind you of that for as long as you’re here.”

Her eyes widen, and she takes a small step back, her breaths coming quicker. “Well, shit, Bexley. Where was that gusto last year when you could have used it?”

“I guess I needed a little inspiration.”

Hope’s surprise relaxes into a smile, and it just might be the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen her wear. It feels like the beginning of forgiveness—and maybe something more.

“How about you use that inspiration to give me feedback on these new designs?” She pulls her phone from her pocket and shakes it in front of me.

“Only if you let me make you dinner.”

“Deal.”

Chapter Ten

HOPE

Anderson flips on the switch to the cafeteria kitchen and leads me to the back of the room. There's a long stainless-steel counter with a huge matching refrigerator to the right and a walk-in pantry beside it.

I look around at the immaculate room and laugh. "Wow, I just got hit with all the fun memories of cafeteria duty. As much as I loved this place, I do not miss that chore one single bit."

Anderson chuckles, his focus on grabbing ingredients for whatever he's cooking up. "Cafeteria duty isn't all that bad."

"Says the man who never worked a shift of it."

His grin widens, and I can almost see the old Anderson charm that I loved getting glimpses of when he would finally let his guard down. Those moments were few and far between, but they were worth all the waiting.

"Trust me, my brothers and I worked plenty of food shifts when we were young. I paid my dues. Besides," he says, throwing me a glance while pulling out a carton of heavy cream, "it could have been worse. I never made you shovel manure."

I wrinkle my nose. "Wow. So generous of you."

"My dad believed that the best leaders were ones that understood the ins and outs of everything they were asking. He might have taken that notion a bit too far at times, but I respect the principle of it."

I hop on the counter while watching him navigate the kitchen as though he could be doing it blind. After hearing his heartbreaking story earlier, the darkness I always saw behind Anderson's tough exterior finally started to make sense. "I might joke about cafeteria duty, but I never complained."

His gaze settles on me. "I know."

There's something more to those two simple words that resembles

gratitude. I can feel them in his stare, in his tone, in the way he has to suck in a breath a moment later before averting his eyes. Anderson truly is a man passionate about the simple life, and I still love that about him.

He quickens his steps around the kitchen, pulling together noodles, thawed chicken breasts, seasonings, spinach, tomatoes, and cheese. He doesn't even stop to look at a recipe. It's almost like he prepared for this exact moment.

"Do you still go to that bar down the road?"

He heats the stove and adds some olive oil. "You mean the Barnacle?" Anderson makes a face and smiles. "Not as much. I've been pretty busy. Besides, it's not really the same without you and Silver." He quirks a lip. "You two were always ridiculous drunks."

I scoff at the insult. "We were giddy drunks. You only think we were ridiculous because you were always so boring."

"If being your designated driver so you two could get sloshed every time we went out is your definition of boring, then I guess I'm guilty."

I fold my arms while memories of our treks off-site flip through my mind. "I offered to drive many times."

Anderson shrugs. "I know. But you had fun. I liked watching you have fun."

I tilt my head, my chest swelling at the sentiment. "You also loved kicking my ass at darts. Maybe that's the real reason you wanted me to be the drunk one."

He pins me with his stare. "Be careful with that mouth of yours, Davies. I have no problem reminding you of what a sore loser you are."

I straighten my posture and lift my chin. "Remind me then. Let's have a sober match."

He holds out his hand. "You're on." I accept his handshake, recognizing the firmness of his grip and the gentle squeeze he adds when he steps closer to me. "But not tonight," he adds. "After today, I'm gonna need that drink."

The loss of his touch when he releases my hand is almost as surprising as it is disappointing. "Yeah," I mutter. "Me too."

He pours us both a glass of merlot then we chat about old memories while he cooks us the most beautiful creamy Tuscan chicken dish. It smells and looks to die for. By the time we sit down to eat, my stomach is going crazy—and not just because of hunger.

I can't stop looking at Anderson as if it's for the first time—the way his

amber eyes light up, the animation in his voice when he starts talking about how he recently fell in love with cooking, the passion for his new menu that he developed after he started testing recipes with Bruno, the resident chef. He's an amazing man. I just wish he could see that about himself.

"Wait until you see what we have planned for the saloon," he tells me with equal enthusiasm. "It's going to be epic. Just think, fancy appetizers, fresh table bread, gourmet salads, wood fire grill steaks and pizzas, and fresh seafood."

"Sounds expensive."

"That's the best part. It's not. We're working with farms all around the islands to get fresh ingredients for prime cost. Jamison would flip over the profit margin though. Our guests shouldn't feel like they're stuck paying top dollar for food they can get cheaper right down the road."

"That's noble of you."

Anderson's mouth tips up on the side. "Helps me sleep at night. How's Seattle food compared to here?"

"Expensive."

He chuckles.

"But I eat enough of it to give you a fair assessment of your new menu."

He raises a brow. "That's not in the job contract."

I wave a hand, trying to ignore the zoo of flutters coming alive in my rib cage. "I think we can work something out. A woman's gotta eat, and you were never afraid of my honest opinion."

"Nope. Because I trusted you."

"And I was always right." I grin.

"I think you mispronounced stubborn."

A gasp flies from my mouth in mock astonishment. "I was not stubborn. Maybe I was a little glued to my ideas, but I could always defend my reasons if I needed to."

"And you always won."

I grin. "Which means you did too. We were a team."

His nod is slow as his eyes begin to wander the terrain of my face like a soft caress. "The best team. I've been lost without you, Hope."

My chest tightens, his words both a dream and a nightmare all in one breath. My next breath is slow as I pull the air deeply into my lungs, not wanting to answer him too quickly. If I do, I'm bound to say something emotional, instinctive, and dumb.

“You seem to have done just fine without me, Anderson. You’ve accomplished a lot.” I swallow, hating the emotion rocking my chest. Maybe there’s always been a part of me deep down that wanted him to need me, but now I know he never truly had. “I’m proud of you.”

Sadness washes over his expression as he shakes his head. “Thank you, but you are giving me far too much credit. This idea wasn’t mine alone, remember?”

How could I forget? “What if we invite your brothers to the grand reopening? I know we haven’t pinned down a date, but we’ll need to send the invites out soon.”

He shakes his head. “They won’t come. Jamison maybe, but I highly doubt it.”

“Well, it will be a nice gesture. It’s still their camp too. And who knows. Maybe you’ll be surprised.”

Anderson’s face scrunches in doubt. “I guess it wouldn’t hurt to send them an invite.”

I smile. “See? My ideas are great.”



* * *

After dinner, I head back to my room while Anderson goes to his office to answer some emails he saw come in on his phone. I’m feeling lighter after such a heavy day, and I’m smiling from dinner. For the first time since I’ve been back, I’m happy to be here. Suddenly, I realize that it’s Monday and I only have a week left until I’m back in Seattle. I want more time.

Almost as soon as the door to my cabin is closed, Dexter is calling.

“Hey,” I say while kicking off my shoes. “I just got in from dinner.”

“Good. That means we can video chat.” There’s a click on the line then an invitation to add video. I accept and smile as his handsome face pops on the screen. “Much better.”

He's unshaven and droopy eyed with his white shirt halfway unbuttoned, revealing his toned upper chest. He must have his phone propped on something because he's using one hand to swirl a drink while the other presses against his upper thigh.

"Long day?"

He shrugs, seemingly unaffected by anything that came before this phone call. "Aren't they all?" He tips his glass in my direction. "Just as long as yours, it seems." His gaze flickers over me and lands on the space above my yellow V-neck shirt, where a hint of cleavage shows. "Looking good, Miss Davies. As usual."

His comment feels pointed, but I'm not grasping his intent behind it. "Thank you."

Dexter's lip tips up at the side in a subtle sneer. "Our new client is quite pleased with the work you've been doing there. I suppose a congratulations is in order."

I choose to push aside the fact that Dexter has been checking up on me and force a smile. "Well, I don't have much to show for it yet, but branding is approved, which is a huge step in the right direction. This week is going to fly."

Dexter nods. "That it is. I was hard on you last week. Perhaps that's because I miss having you close where I can keep a personal eye on you at all times." He slips a hand up his thigh to where his shiny gray pants stretch around his hard dick. "Do you miss me?"

I'm expecting my pulse to race and my chest to grow hot at the way he's looking at me, but none of that comes.

"I do," I lie. My swallow comes next, and I'm certain Dexter reads that all wrong.

There's no question that Dexter is one of the hottest men I've ever laid eyes on, and sneaking around with him in and out of the office has been the thrill of a lifetime. But right here and now, I'm beginning to question our future or if any exists.

"Let me see you."

My chest tightens and my breaths become labored but not because I'm caught up in the hot moment Dexter is trying to provide. He's asking me to strip. He's telling me he misses me. And the only thing I truly want to do is hang up and take the longest hot bath known to man.

"Now?" I let out an awkward laugh, desperately trying to change the

direction of the conversation.

He squeezes his dick while his eyes narrow into slits. “Since I can’t be there to do it for you, I’m going to need you to do it yourself, sweet girl.”

Panic quickens in my chest. I need time to process everything I’ve been feeling over the past week, because while being back at Camp Bexley has been a painful reminder of what I’d lost, it’s also a haunting reminder of everything I’d once had.

But no matter how conflicted I may feel now, none of that is Dexter’s fault. He’s been good to me in ways that healed me when I needed it most. I walked into Urgency with a naive outlook on everything, zero experience in the corporate world, and a heart so battered and bruised I couldn’t even think to regard Dexter as anything more than an asshole of a boss who I needed to please.

If anything, Dexter saved me. And that’s why I prop my phone on the desk against the windowsill and slip my shirt off over my head. That’s why I unclasp my bra and let it slide off my body to accompany my shirt. And that’s why, at Dexter’s command, I slip off my skirt and slide my fingers into my panties to find my clit.

“Fuck yes, baby girl. My cock is so hungry for that tight pussy. Rub it for me. Think of me deep inside you.” Dexter’s completely naked now, stroking his erection faster while directing me to touch my breasts.

My core aches at my desperate need for a release. It’s been too long, and now I’m too worked up to quit. I plant a hand at the edge of the desk and spread my legs wider so that I can slip two fingers inside.

My lids fall shut, and a moan slips past my throat when I feel the first signs of an orgasm building deep inside me. Dexter’s labored breathing and grunts are a helpful soundtrack, setting the mood as I fight off images of a man who doesn’t belong to me. But the way Anderson looked when I found him at the stables burns brightly in my mind—with the late-afternoon sun casting a golden glow on his tan and toned body, and his white shirt stretched over his biceps and chest like he’d be better off removing them completely.

“Ah!” My orgasm hits me hard and fast, thoughts of Anderson propelling me over the edge before I can redirect them and focus on Dexter.

My lids open to find Dexter at the tail end of his release, a sticky mess cloaking his cock as he watches me convulse, completely clueless to the fact that I’ve been thinking of another man.

Guilt wraps its ugly fist around my chest and squeezes hard, causing me

to gasp and look away from my phone screen. When I do, my curtains blow, wide enough to draw my eyes to a figure on the other side of the window, standing in the middle of the trail in front of my cabin—a man who just watched me bring myself to orgasm—completely clueless that he’s the one to thank.

Chapter Eleven

ANDERSON

My heart is still racing when I close the door to my house and press my back against it. My dick throbs from all the excitement, and I don't think twice about yanking my pants down and pumping myself in desperation for a release.

I must be dreaming. There's no possible way I just watched Hope strip down naked and pleasure herself to climax. She couldn't possibly have been the one in that window, with her amazing full breasts heaving, her tits pointed straight at me, her abs tightening with each expelled breath, and her finger greedily pushing into her center until...

"Gah," I practically yell at the orgasm that comes charging through me and spilling onto the floor in several spurts. After years of abstaining from sex, I've practiced the art of self-pleasure often enough to build up my tolerance. It takes time and the right mindset to get me to the right place to release, but after seeing Hope like that—bare, beautiful, and vulnerable—it doesn't surprise me that it took me no time at all.

My shower does little to wash away the guilt I feel for lurking outside her window, but what the hell was I supposed to do once I saw her there? It could have all been my imagination. I'm still unsure that it wasn't. Luck has never been on my side when it comes to women, so then why tonight? Why Hope?

I towel dry off and change into jeans and a T-shirt. I need a drink. Maybe several. Maybe then I'll be able to cope with the fact that I'm a voyeur, because while I may feel guilty for watching Hope without her permission, I've never been so turned on in my life.

The second I open the door, I'm blasted with shock at the sight of a visitor on my doorstep. Another vision, but this time fully clothed in a pair of black leggings and a long yellow shirt that hugs her curves. She looks freshly

showered herself and stares back at me with innocent eyes.

“You watched me.”

There’s no use denying it. “I did.”

“That wasn’t for you.”

“I’m well aware.” I raise my brows because I’m not an idiot. I could see her phone propped there in the windowsill. Her boyfriend is one lucky bastard. Jealousy makes like a wrecking ball to my insides.

She opens her mouth to speak again, but nothing comes out. For once, Hope is stunned into silence.

“I’m headed to the saloon for a drink. Want to join?”

She blinks in surprise then turns to look over her shoulder like she’s trying to formulate an excuse as to why she shouldn’t. A spark ignites in my chest, and instinct follows.

Instead of waiting for an answer, I take a step closer to her, crossing the threshold, and then shut the door behind me. “Let’s go.”

I’m done taking her hesitation for an answer. We’ve come this far, through distance and time and all the heartbreak in between. We’ve made some strides today, and I confessed my biggest, darkest secret. It’s time she meets me halfway.

“Anderson,” she says, jogging behind me to catch up. “We should talk about what happened.”

I frown. “What for? It’s done. It happened. What good can talking do?”

She reaches my side, and her face drops. “You can apologize for spying on me. You were never meant to see that.” Under the tall lamp, I can see her cheeks darkening in color.

“I wasn’t spying,” I say. “I was walking by and happened to see you, but I am sorry for lingering that long without your permission. In my defense, I couldn’t take my eyes off you. Seeing you like that was a beautiful fucking sight. I had no idea you could be so—”

I look at her to find her eyes opened wide. “So what?”

“So unbridled. It was sexy as hell.”

She lets out a frustrated breath. “How can you ever look at me again after that?”

My chest squeezes. “The same way I’ve always looked at you. Like you’re the only woman in the world. My opinion of you will never change.”

Her head shakes as another heavy breath leaves her body. “Why couldn’t you have been this sweet to me when I lived here? I never knew what you

thought of me or what you wanted from me.”

I shrug and aim my focus forward, leading us to the bar. “Because I knew you’d leave one day. You were young and still figuring out what you wanted to do with your life. You were bound to leave, whether I pushed you away or not. Everyone leaves.”

From my peripheral, I can see her scan me like she’s assessing my expression. “I’m not everyone. I was yours. And you were the only one who couldn’t see it.”

My jaw ticks, and my chest squeezes again. I look over at Hope, who’s got her eyes set forward now, her hardened features exposing how much she still cares. All we’ve ever done is fight our feelings for each other. What a waste of a life.

“It’s not that I didn’t see it,” I say, and she meets my gaze. “It’s that I didn’t believe I deserved it.”

She nods. “Hindsight is twenty-twenty and all that.”

Now, that I can agree with.

I open the door to the saloon and let her walk in first then make my way behind the bar. She wanders around the small room, checking out in awe the dark-green interior walls, antique art I found locked away in my dad’s shed, and the cherrywood seating.

“You continue to amaze me, Bexley.” She walks up to the bar wearing a smile. “So, what are we having?”

Hope always loved the fruity stuff. Knowing that, inspiration hits me quickly. “It’s a tequila punch for you.”

She laughs. “A what?”

I grin and focus on mixing her drink. I’m far from what a bartender should be, but it’s funny how much you learn when you’re interviewing potential candidates for a role. After the first set of bartenders came in, I realized I was clueless on how to run a bar, let alone know who would be a good fit to run one. So I watched some videos, memorized a long list of drinks, and created a menu I thought fit the saloon. I plan to start hiring as soon as I get my liquor license.

“You’ll love it,” I promise her with a wink. “Just hand over your keys because you aren’t driving after this one.”

“Har har,” she says to my joke. Then she twists and points to the far end wall of the bar where the dartboard hangs. “Looks like we can have that competition tonight.”

“I thought you wanted us both to be sober for that.”

“Sober or drunk, what’s the difference? As long as we’re on equal footing.”

I nod. “All right, but I warn you. I’m better than I used to be.”

She quirks a brow. “We’ll see about that.”

At some point while I’m still making her drink, she hops off the stool and heads to the jukebox in the corner of the room. “Pick something good.”

She grins and starts punching buttons. The second Bebe Rexha’s “Meant to Be” starts to play, I throw my head back and laugh. How could I have forgotten about drunk karaoke on our off nights in my living room? Those were some of the few times when I might have let loose a little as I belted a terrible version of Florida Georgia Line’s lyrics in the song.

Hope points to me as though I’ll break out in song right now, but I shake my head, refusing. “C’mon!” she calls out.

I laugh again. “Not drunk enough, Sparky. Nice try.” I put the cover on the shaker and mix up the punch before pouring it over ice and walking the drink over to her. She’s deep into the song, singing Bebe Rexha’s parts like she used to—complete with an ass shake to the beat and those sexy eyes batting up at mine.

“Try that and tell me what you think.”

She takes a sip, her hips still swaying to the beat before her eyes roll back after the liquid slides down her throat. “Holy shit, Anderson. That’s really good.” Her eyes get bigger, and she takes a longer sip until half of it is gone. “Where’s yours?”

I make a face and start to head back to the bar. “That one’s a little too fruity for me.”

She grabs my hand, stopping me in my tracks. “Wait. You made mine. Let me make yours.”

I laugh. “No way. I’ll end up with the biggest fucking hangover. I’m a straight-shot-of-bourbon kind of guy.”

She rolls her eyes and walks past me. “Yes, I remember. I’ve got this.”

A minute later, she brings over a tray of two different types of shots and sets them on the high-top table. “There. Tequila Rose for me. Bourbon for you. You have to take a shot for every game you lose.”

I scoff at her ridiculous proposal. “Terrible idea. We both know you’re the one who will be drowning in shots by the end of tonight.”

She tilts her head, eyes sparkling with amusement. “You have very little

faith in my dart playing.”

“No, I just have a lot of confidence in mine.”

She picks up a shot and hands it to me. “Time to catch up. And then we begin.”

With a wink, she waits. I down my shot and pick up another one, still fighting off exotic images of a Hope bringing herself to orgasm and all the fantasies that come with it. What I would give to be the one pleasuring her in every way possible.

“Hello, Earth to Anderson. You’re up.”

I jump forward to the dartboard. “Shit, sorry.”

“What were you thinking about?”

Silence follows. There’s no way in hell I’m answering that, but she must catch on, because she sighs. “Can we forget that little incident earlier ever happened?”

I pluck the blue darts from the pocket and walk toward her with a furrowed brow. “Forget that I saw you naked and getting yourself off? Probably not.”

Hope glares. “Wow, you can’t even be subtle about it.”

I shrug. “I’m not going to lie to you. The truth is there’s no chance of me getting that out of my head. Not ever.”

She growls and knocks her hip into mine. “You’re so frustrating.”

“I could say the same about you.”

She sighs. “I need another shot. Take one with me.” She hands a glass to me, and we both go for it. The burn lighting a path down my chest feels better than I should admit.

Three games and far too many shots later, she’s leaning against the wood wall near the dartboard, her eyes slowly dragging to mine. Before she says a word, I already know what’s on her mind because I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it. Nor do I want to.

Her eyes linger on mine while she chews on her bottom lip, a clear debate going off in her mind. “Can I ask you something that might make you uncomfortable?”

“Sure.”

“Did you like it?”

I almost choke on the last of the liquid still clearing my throat. My eyes widen, and I assess her bright blush and shallowed breaths. “Did I like what?”

She purses her lips. “Did you like what you saw tonight?”

“You mean did I like your body? Or... the *act*?”

“I don’t know. All of it. Call me curious, but I want to know.”

“Well, Curious. Yes, I did. I happened to like it a lot.” I debate whether to leave it at that, but we’ve come this far. “You’re beautiful, Hope. In every way. Body, heart, and soul. You just happen to have a superb body. And as far as the act... it was quite impressive.”

She rolls her eyes and lets out a laugh. “I’m sorry I asked.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. For someone who models the act of always seeing the positives, she has a terrible habit of downplaying her own charm. I walk toward her and pluck my darts from the board then deposit them in the cup. “Don’t be sorry,” I say, quiet enough for her to hear. I slide my gaze to catch hers. “You should know you’re perfect.”

Her chin quivers slightly as she pushes it up like she wants to show me she’s tough. Her lids narrow next. “But I’m too young for you, right?” She quirks a brow. “I didn’t realize that was one of your hang-ups until you told me the other day.”

I swallow. “I was stupid. Like I said, you’re perfect. No exceptions.”

She arches her back slightly while kicking the back of her foot up against the wall. “Yeah, well, you had your chance, Bexley.”

My chest puffs with her words while tension packs my shoulders tight. Warning flags pop up in my mind—along with them, a list of reasons why I should not play into this flirtation.

She has a boyfriend.

She’s not staying.

I’m still no good for her.

But there’s not a single thing on the list that stops me from what I do next.

I place my palms on the wall on either side of her head and lean in, brushing my lips against her ear then holding them there. “I want another one.”

Her body quivers. I can feel it with only our fronts touching. “You just want what you can’t have.”

Maybe it’s the liquid courage, or the fact that I can sense the countdown to our short time together reaching its end, but it’s enough that I’m going to pursue the woman I should have never let get away.

My tongue darts out to taste her lobe, then I suck it into my mouth,

causing her to gasp. “I. Want. You.”

“Your timing is impeccable. You’re too late, Bexley. Things aren’t the way they used to be. My life is in Seattle now. I have a dream job. And I’m taken.”

“Are you in love with him?” I hold my breath.

Her next breath is sharp. “W-What?”

“Are you in love with him?” I ask it slower, knowing there’s no other way to phrase it. It’s a simple question, and the fact that she’s hesitating at all speaks wonders.

“Do you love him more than you loved me?”

Silence, and then... “No.” A whisper.

My heart takes off in my chest like a jackhammer. I slide my mouth away from her ear so that her lips are only an inch from mine. “I want to kiss you.”

Her breath hitches. “I-I can’t give you permission to do that,” she whispers.

“Then I’ll take your lips and hold them hostage with mine. No one can fault you for a stolen kiss.”

Her forehead creases, and a pained expression takes over her face. “What if I tell you no?”

Just the possibility of being turned down by this woman, right here, right now, is too much. My chest hurts at the thought. “Tell me no, and I’ll walk right out that door. But you won’t do that. You want my tongue in your mouth as much as I do.” She squirms, and I lean in so my forehead touches hers, my breaths coming faster. “Fuck your boyfriend. He doesn’t know you the way I do. I might be late to the game, but I’m here to stay. And win. So, what will it be?”

She squeezes her lids closed and opens them again. “If I say no, you’ll leave? And if I say nothing...”

“Then I steal what’s always been mine.”

Moments pass. Seconds. Maybe even minutes. The whole while, I’m holding my breath, giving her every opportunity in the world to reject what she wants me to believe doesn’t belong to me. But she’s wrong. Hope was, is, and always will be mine.

My mouth moves across hers while one hand slides down the wall to the nape of her neck, reveling in the smoothness of her skin. Even the feel of her is perfection.

The last time we kissed, I was so caught up in self-loathing that I couldn’t

get past my own fears. But now, my fears have changed. Not getting another chance to explore everything we should have had is my biggest fear of all. This time, I don't want to miss a thing.

I capture her bottom lip between mine and move slowly, savoring the taste of her green-apple lip gloss and tequila-soaked breath. If she's heaven, then I'm hell, and we're floating somewhere in between as our lips begin to find their rhythm.

Firming my lips to hers, I snake my arms around the small of her back and push my palm into her arch. A groan from her chest rumbles against mine, and my head fogs at the sensation. Her lips could be poison, and this kiss could very well be the death of me. I certainly treat it like it will be our last.

My tongue dives between her lips, finding hers and trying desperately not to rush. I've been dreaming about this for too long for it to be over in the blink of an eye.

When I feel her arms wrap my back and press me closer, it only fuels my already ravenous need to live out every fantasy I've ever had of Hope. To touch her, to hold her, to make love to her. But none of it will matter if I can't keep her.

Even as my mind blurs and the thundering of my heart rages on in my chest, my senses are more alive than ever before. She's electric in my hold, buzzing through me and intoxicating every fiber of my being. I want more.

My hands find their way to her ass, squeezing then lifting her and wrapping her legs around my hips. I push her back against the wall and kiss her deeper, aching at the friction our bodies create, especially where I want her most.

"You taste like apple pie," I murmur against her lips before burying my mouth in the crook of her neck. "I could devour every inch of you." I swipe at her neck with my tongue and groan. "Maybe I will."

She gasps as I rub against her center, our clothes an annoying hindrance to a deeper connection. I do it again, gently rubbing against her as she moves up and down the wall. Her chest pushes out toward me as her eyes close and she gives into our rhythm. I may not be inside her yet, but after thousands of fantasies of scenarios playing out just like this, this is so much better.

Her palms push down on my shoulders, her hips roll to match my movements, and our mouths crash together once more. This time, everything is more intense. Our tangled breaths quicken. She grips my hair. I squeeze

her ass. Hardened nipples poke through her fabric, and my mouth gravitates toward them, wetting her shirt and sucking her between my lips until none of it is enough.

Growling, I yank her from the wall and take three long steps to reach the bar. The second she's seated with her legs wrapped around my hips, my fingers slide beneath her shirt and drag it up over her head.

I cup her head and pull her mouth to mine, kissing her deeply while filling one of her breasts with my free hand. "Tell me you're mine," I mumble against her mouth. I need to know that from this point on, I'm the only one. No more boyfriend. No more late-night phone sex calls. When she doesn't respond right away, I deepen our kiss until I feel her moan hit the back of my throat. "Tell me, Hope. Please. I need to hear you say it."

Dread sinks through me when her lips slip away from mine and her head moves slowly from side to side. And then she says the words that might just kill me. "I can't. This was a mistake. I need to go."

She slips off the counter, scoops her top up off the floor. And then with one final heart-filled glance in my direction, she walks toward the door... then she's gone.

Chapter Twelve

HOPE

My lips still burn from his kiss, my mind seared with images of last night. Drunk images. Sinful images. Erotic images. I can't stop replaying them. I'm a glutton for him. A glutton for the past and all the things I yearned to have. He offered them to me last night in ways I never could have anticipated, and I wanted to accept... until my guilty conscience came in to haunt me.

It's a selfish debate between right and wrong. Dexter and I may not have an official term or status for what we are, but until last night I would have never considered being with anyone but him. And he wants more. He challenged me to take these two weeks away to decide—a decision I still don't feel ready to make, especially after what happened between Anderson and me last night.

I like Dexter. I really do. I like how he's challenged me from the start. How he pursued me, giving me no room to question how he felt. I needed that after how things ended with Anderson. To know a man is completely and unabashedly crazy for me is one of the sexiest things I've ever experienced. It became my addiction—to feel wanted and desired in a way that was almost primal. It's exactly what Anderson showed me last night.

Except... Anderson is my past.

I've moved on. Physically and emotionally. My life is so different now than when I pined away for him every day for three years. The old me would have never thought twice about falling right back into the Anderson well I'd lived in before. Not anymore. Like I told him last night—he had his chance.

I kick my sheets away, feeling more defiant and prouder of myself than ever. Confidence bursts through me as I shower and get ready for a new day. My focus is on what I came here to do. Prove to Dexter and everyone else at Urgency that I am ready for that promotion. I've worked hard for it, and this

is only the beginning of what I'm capable of. Distractions be gone.

Red. That's the color I choose to wear today. It signals power and strength. With long, loose sleeves, a draped bodice, and a mock neck, this dress screams class. Which is exactly what I plan to exemplify today. I add a pair of gold, strappy heels, a matching bracelet, and complete the look with makeup and curled hair.

If Anderson dares to see me today, he'll know exactly what he's getting. Business only.

I charge down the trail, ignoring the uneven surfaces and pebbles as they dig into the pads of my feet. Like always, the coffee is ready, so I grab a fresh cup and a green apple before heading to Anderson's office. I'm surprised to find the light already on and Anderson sitting in the chair across from his desk, head down and buried in his hands.

The sight of him is a needle straight into my balloon of confidence. My chest squeezes, and I'm instantly aware of the heavy emotion billowing in the space around us.

"Good morning." I try to give him my best greeting, one filled with professionalism and a straightforwardness that I don't truly feel.

His head snaps up, revealing swollen eyes, an unkempt beard, and disheveled hair. The tug on my heart is instant. He immediately scrolls my attire, disappointment filling his already-dire features, until he reaches my eyes. "Well, that answers that."

I frown, confused. "What answers what?"

He shakes his head and looks away. "You either remember nothing or you're completely unaffected. Last night was—"

"A mistake." I'm quick to jump in, my heart already racing.

His head snaps back to me, and he glares. "Bullshit, Hope. Last night was the furthest thing from a mistake, and you know it."

"We were drunk. We got caught up in the moment. I shouldn't have led you on like that. I'm sorry."

He buries his head in his hands, going quiet for far too long. I stand in front of him, to where his knees lightly touch mine, and lean back against the desk. "Anderson, please look at me. I didn't mean to hurt you. You just..." I struggle to find the words. "You just want what you can't have."

He chuckles dryly as his head lifts, eyes meeting mine. "So you've said. But I've always wanted you. It wasn't until you came back here that I finally figured out that it was never my place to tell you to leave. I never wanted you

to go. The morning you left, I watched you leave, knowing I would never be the same. It gutted me. All I could do was pray that you would come back. And then you did.”

“Yeah,” I burst out, sick and tired of his feelings of guilt. “I came back for a job—after a year of moving on. So tell me why you think it’s okay to drag me right back into your world of hurt. I loved you, Anderson. I loved you so damn much that I couldn’t even begin to see that you would never return my feelings until you stomped all over them like they never mattered. I was stupid and naive, and I refuse to be that woman again. Leaving was the best thing that ever happened to me because it helped me get over you.”

The next few seconds are filled with silence, save for the sound of my heavy breathing. I can’t believe I said that, but he needed to hear it.

He shakes his head, gaze darkening. “You don’t mean that.” His rough, calloused hand finds the back of my leg. “You didn’t get over me.”

My breath hitches in surprise. I’ve never seen Anderson like this. So commanding, almost aggressive.

“Stop lying to yourself,” he continues, his gruff tone like friction to every sensitive nerve ending. “Last night was all the proof I needed to know that this thing between us is more alive than ever.” His hand climbs, higher and higher until it’s right below my ass. “The sooner you stop fooling yourself, the better off we’ll all be.”

Rage bursts through me, like a levy in desperate need of breaking. I press my palms into the desk for leverage then push a heel against his chest, pinning him to his chair. “No.” My breaths come heavily. “You don’t get to make the rules anymore, Bexley. I’ve worked too hard for what I have now.”

“Like what? A fancy car, a nice apartment, all wrapped up in a fancy city?”

I lift my chin. “Yes. Also a man who doesn’t make me question my worth, and...”

When I fail to continue with my list of everythings, a spark lights his eyes.

“Keep your dream job,” he says, his eyes locking on mine. “Keep your city, keep your car. If those things are part of your dream, then keep them. But be with me.” His anger subsides, revealing his desperation. His head tilts, and he scoots toward me, pushing my knee in toward my chest. “If anyone can make sure you see your worth, it’s me. Please. I need you.”

His words are like a vise on my heart, squeezing it in his grip with a

strength that's more than I can take. I'm so focused on his darkened expression, that I almost don't notice his hand slide up my leg that's still anchored to the floor. He scoots closer, as if testing my boundaries, causing the heel planted on his chest to slide over his shoulder until he's right there at the opening of my dress. He bites down on his lip, his gaze slipping to where the fabric of my panties stretches at my center.

I gasp as shock buzzes through me, trapping me beneath his gaze in a web that I walked straight into. I'm speechless, clueless how to react. How is this happening? How are we right back where we left off last night? I was so determined when I walked into this office, and it took almost nothing for me to feel consumed by a man who isn't mine.

"Saying goodbye to you was the death of me," he rasps.

His eyes are back on mine, but his hand continues to move up my leg, squeezing my thigh, closing in on my hot center.

"But you came back," he continues. "And you brought me back to life at a time I needed it most. If you think I'm giving up on you now then you're wrong. I get a second chance to show you exactly what you mean to me—and just how far I'll go to keep you."

A thumb slides against my panties, up to my clit then back down. I'm so wet that my fabric sticks to me where he presses. Up then down. He's so concentrated on what his hands can do, and I'm so fascinated by his clear determination, I'm not sure either of us takes a breath. And then a breeze from the overhead fan blows across my center, making me shiver.

The movement causes him to look up, eyes connecting with mine. For a flash of a second, I think he might grow a conscience and stop. Panic licks through me. I roll my hips, drawing his focus back to my soaked center. "Put your mouth on me, Anderson." I'm breathing so hard, I'm surprised I can even get the words out. "Do it now because this is the last chance you'll get."

Fear strikes in his expression. His eyes glow with anger. Then he rips my panties to the side, dives beneath my skirt, and feasts on me like it's his last supper. Between his eager tongue and my glistening excitement, I'm completely drenched, making for an epic slip and slide courtesy of his mouth. And what a fine mouth it is.

My head tosses back as I suck in a deep breath while fighting off wave after wave of my pending release. I can feel the build of months, years, of being starved for affection in this way. No man has ever put his mouth on me down there and earned my orgasm. But Anderson just might.

He's ravishing me like I'm his queen. Licking the length of my slit, teasing my clit, and then sucking me into his mouth. He growls against me, torturing me slowly before feeding me two thick fingers. I'm stretched full, bursting at the seams and dying for more. Aching for him. I lift my dress to watch him, which was clearly a mistake. His eyes are closed as his tongue flicks against me, fast like butterfly wings in motion.

"Where did this come from?" I say, fighting through lost breath.

"I've had years to think about all the things I want to do to you," he murmurs against me. "You'll need to excuse my eagerness. I'm only getting started." He dives back in, flicking and sucking me faster than before.

It's impossible to stop the next wave of orgasm. It crashes through me, detonating so fast and so hard that I'm convulsing against his mouth, my entire body shaking as a scream rips from my throat.

"Oh, fuck," he says, breathless. "You taste better than I thought you would."

The sound of a belt slipping through the loops comes next. Then the sound of metal teeth unzipping. Lastly, the sound of heavy material hitting the floor.

I'm still convulsing when he pulls me down onto his lap, his cock hard and planted right where I'm thoroughly soaked. His mouth greets mine firmly, kissing me so hard and deep that I can taste myself.

He lifts his hips like he's fighting his way through his briefs, and he won't stop until he's inside me. Instinctively, I start to grind, wanting more of the friction. Wanting nothing more than to fuck this man into tomorrow to repay him for the best damn orgasm of my life.

"Fuck me, Anderson," I moan. My fingers slide through his thick hair as I rock against him again. He's so big. I don't need to see him to know, not with the way he's nudging against me, but I'll die if I don't get to feel him inside me. "Please."

He growls and reaches for my panties then pulls them apart and shreds the delicate fabric with one go. He crumples them in his fist and tucks them into his shirt pocket before reaching back down to grip my ass. He rocks me harder, faster, not stopping until my mind feels like it's going to explode.

"Anderson, I'm going to..." The words aren't even fully out before my body is exploding again.

A smile tips his lips before he kisses me again. His mouth slides to my ear. "Trust me, there's nothing I want more than to fuck you. Tell me you're

mine. Before I have you, I need to know there's no one else."

I squeeze my eyes shut as every ounce of guilt I feel gets pushed aside by what I want most. I want Anderson. I've always wanted Anderson. "I'm yours," I say on a breath. I pull back to look him into his eyes. "I've always been yours. I lied about having a boyfriend."

He pulls back slightly. "What the fuck?"

"There's still someone. It's just a fling, but he wants more."

His eyes light up with hope. "So you'll end things."

My frown feels heavy. "It's... complicated."

Rage forms on his face. "What's so complicated about this, Hope? We want to be together. You don't have to give up a single thing. I wouldn't make you do that. Seattle isn't far from here. I'll come to you every chance I get, and you can come here. We'll make it work."

I think about my job, my new life, and the fact that ending things with Dexter comes with losing everything. I can't imagine him wanting to keep me around the office if he knows the truth. But how can I continue with Dexter if it's so easy for me to fall back in love with another man?

I cup Anderson's face and stare deeply into his eyes. "Please, just give me some time. You owe me that much."

He sighs and buries his head in my chest. "Time. So much time has already been stolen from us. I don't want to wait any longer... but I will." He looks back up then touches his lips to mine. "I'll wait as long as you need."

I kiss him again, this time slower, committing each inch of his lips to memory until I'm lost in him all over again. I don't even know how long we stay there, the residue of my release soaking his still-engorged length. But I'll never forget the chime that comes through the speakers, turning our heads toward movement captured on the security camera. I especially will never forget the sight of Dexter's Mercedes... pulling into a parking space in the front lot.

Chapter Thirteen

ANDERSON

“S hit,” Hope cries out, peeling her body from me. “That’s my boss.” She jumps to her feet and races to retrieve her panties before remembering that I destroyed them, while I get redressed at a much slower rate.

“I take it you didn’t know he was coming.”

She looks like she wants to cry. “No, not at all. He’s supposed to be on a plane to California right now.”

I frown, noting the strangeness of it all. Is that what these bigwig city businesses are all about? Surprise drop-ins on their employees to keep them on their toes? I watch Hope fly around the room then check her hair and makeup. Apparently, her boss’s tactic works wonders, but I can’t imagine ever being that type of leader.

A chuckle leaves my throat. “You don’t have to be so nervous. I’ll make sure to tell him what a fantastic job you’re doing. Again.” I tilt my head, realizing I know the name of the agency she works for but not her boss’s name. “He called me after you and I had dinner last night and I raved about you. What’s his name again?”

Hope puts down her phone that she was using as her mirror and sighs. “Dexter Van Clark.”

I can’t help but roll my eyes at that name. “Let me guess. The third?”

She stifles a laugh. “The fourth, actually.”

A groan fills my throat. “Great. At least I know what I’m dealing with. Can’t wait to meet the guy,” I mutter dryly. I don’t like to see her all freaked out like this. “Why don’t I go out there and greet him so I can get in a few glowing remarks about you?”

Hope sinks back in her chair. She seems to be considering my offer. “Um. Okay. And I’ll start working?”

I nod, finding her nervousness far more hilarious than I should. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell him about how many times I made you come just now.”

Her jaw drops and her eyes grow wide, then she shakes her head and walks toward me. “Never mind. I’m going with you.”

Laughing, I wrap my arms around her waist and plant a kiss on her forehead. “Stay. Maybe I’ll even give him a tour of the place to occupy him for a while. Surely, he’s here to schmooze me.”

Hope still looks panicked, and I can’t make sense of it, but she backs down, her expression softening while her eyes remain uncertain. “Okay. But before you go, I need to tell you something about Dexter.”

Smiling, I back away toward the door. “Don’t worry, Hope. I already have this guy figured out. He’s here to make sure his new client is taken care of, and thanks to you, he very much is.”

“Yes, but he’s—”

I wink, not letting her worry a second longer. “There’s nothing you can tell me about that guy I haven’t figured out myself. Trust me.”

With a final smile, I take a sharp turn out to the parking lot. It’s time to charm Hope’s boss and make damn sure she’s taken care of the way she deserves.

He climbs out of his white Mercedes sports car similar to the way Hope did on that first day, with an air of haughtiness and power. I’m standing right in front of him, but I don’t think he sees me, because he makes it a point to let his gaze travel, his lip flat lined to show me just how unimpressed he is, and then lets his focus settle on me.

“Welcome to Camp Bexley.”

Dexter slips his glasses off, pockets them, and then smiles, his hand reaching out toward me.

“Dexter Van Clark, and you are?”

I meet his handshake with a firm one of my own. Maybe it’s ego, maybe it’s pride, but the fact that the man I’m paying large sums of money to at each phase of this project has no clue who I am has me reeling.

“Anderson Bexley,” I say, noting his surprise by the immediate loosening in his grip. “I believe I’m your client.”

Dexter chuckles while releasing his hand from mine. “A pleasure to finally meet you, Mr. Bexley.”

“Oh, please call me Anderson. Mr. Bexley is my father.”

Dexter’s charming smile widens. “Of course. Likewise, call me Dexter. I

hope it's okay that I popped by for a quick visit. I like to check in on projects from time to time to ensure my client is being looked after to the full extent of our capabilities."

All I can think of is how fast I want to get rid of this guy so that Hope and I can get back to where we left off. I can still taste her on my tongue. I can still remember my pulse rocketing through my dick at record speed at the sight of her slick clit. I can still hear those tiny gasps and moans as I made her come alive within my grip. "*Fuck me, Anderson.*" Her moan still rings like gong in my mind.

My goddess. My Hope. My second chance at life. I'll worship her for a lifetime if she'll give me the chance.

"That's kind of you, but there's no need for that. As I said on the phone last night, Hope has really been helping us step up our game."

Dexter smiles and then looks around at the nearly empty parking lot. "So, you've got a skeleton crew here, I take it?"

His question is odd, but I don't feel any reason to lie. "No crew at all. It's just me. And Hope, of course."

Something changes in his expression that fires off alarm bells in my head. Anger, confusion, jealousy? I don't know the man, but I'm beginning to wonder if he even read over the contract he signed with Silver. The details were there, every minute detail.

He slips back into his fake-ass easygoing smile. "So, where is my hardworking girl? You say she's been of quite the help?"

"She's in my office, working away. And yes. I'm happy to report that she was the right woman for the job. Considering she spent a few years here before she started at Urgency, she's been able to incorporate her knowledge into all the promotions material she's prepared so far."

Dexter's brows rise. "I can't wait to see everything you've approved so far. Your reopening will be quite the success." He looks around again. "Can I ask what your plans are for the remodel?"

Anger spikes in my chest. I can't tell if the man is trying to be insulting or if it comes second nature. "The remodel is complete." I wave a hand forward. "Please, let me give you the extended tour."



* * *

Three hours after giving Dexter Van Asshole the tour de la Camp Bexley, I know far too much about the Fortune 500 entrepreneur. Not only did he start his successful advertising company at the age of twenty, while he was still in college, but he was able to secure his first business suite in Seattle only two years later. From there, things only got bigger and better for him.

When Silver told me about the company she was hiring for me, I had my doubts. I certainly wouldn't have agreed to it had she given me the name of the place so I could do some research. "Trust me," she said. So I had. If she believed she'd found someone who could lead the camp in the direction my brothers and I once dreamed, then I needed to trust her.

Now I know Silver's efforts were based primarily on the fact that Hope worked for the man.

"Your brother is Jamison Bexley, is that right?"

The question throws me, jerking my focus back to Dexter. "That's right. How do you know him?"

Dexter grins and shakes his head. "I've met him a few times through mutual clients of ours. He's very impressive. We've even sat down to discuss how his services can help Urgency." He raises his brows. "I wouldn't have thought that he started out here." Dexter looks around with a curious expression. "No offense. He just doesn't fit the picture."

I shrug, not wanting to give away the sour feeling that stirs in my chest. "Yeah, well, the picture doesn't fit him much either anymore, if you know what I'm saying." I wink, like I have an inkling of a clue to what I said and lead him the rest of the way to the office.

Dexter has had nonstop questions about Hope the entire walk, as though he was formulating his review for her right there on the spot. Hope did say she was up for a promotion. Maybe this is her chance to get it.

"Hope will surprise you like that," I say, causing Dexter's sharp eyes to

land on me. “She’s a go-getter. That woman can accomplish anything she puts her mind to.”

Dexter’s brows rise. “Hence her upcoming promotion at Urgency.”

I nod, pretending that this is the first time I’ve heard about the potential offer. It sounds like it’s happening. “If what I’ve seen is any indication, that promotion would be well deserved.”

Dexter stops in his tracks when he spots the saloon. “That’s an unexpected sight.”

“An addition,” I explain. “Twenty-two years ago, my parents decided to make something of the land that had been in our family for decades. A kids’ camp was born, and that turned into sixth grade camps, sports camps, team-building camps—you name it. But my brothers and I always saw something more for this place. A luxury camping resort of sorts. One that would be grounded in nature rather than city lights and outdoor shopping malls. We didn’t want our roots to go anywhere—hence why the original kids’ side of camp was renovated over the past couple of years.”

“I see,” Dexter says with an impressed nod. “Very inventive.”

Why does it sound like everything coming out of the guy’s mouth is just part of his schtick? He doesn’t understand this place or why I care so much to build a resort out of it. He doesn’t see a cabin set on the water as the treasure it is. He doesn’t see the beauty in his natural surroundings. No, Dexter Van Clark is a greedy man in a fancy suit who cares more about his bottom line than the camp he’s been hired to save.

My judgments might be harsh, but I can’t picture Hope working for the man. I certainly can’t imagine her bending to his rules. Hope is a woman who writes her own rules.

“She’s right this way.” I lead Dexter through the main building, past the front desk, into the staff room then out into the hall that leads to my office.

I push open the door, halfway expecting to find Hope long gone. I would have covered for her. But she’s there, eyes wide, with a dazzling smile on her face.

“Mr. Van Clark, what a pleasant surprise.” She stands and walks around her desk to extend a hand.

He takes it and shakes it slowly. An intimidation tactic, I’m sure. “I was heading out for a business trip when I thought to stop in on my favorite up-and-coming project manager and meet my new client.” His gaze settles on me again while his hand remains gripping Hope’s. An ugly feeling snakes

through my chest, but I can't quite make sense of it.

"I wouldn't have known that Hope is an 'up-and-coming' anything with the way she's been handling things around here," I say. "Seems to me she's already arrived. I am impressed with her ideas and execution."

Dexter gives me a curious smile, like he's onto the fact that I just had my face buried between Hope's thighs. "As you've mentioned several times today. Believe me, I'm very happy to hear that hiring Urgency has been beneficial to your needs." He releases Hope's hand and smiles. "I'd love to see where we're at with everything."

"Well," Hope starts while making her way back around the desk. Her entire demeanor has reverted right back to the day she got to camp. So poised and professional. All traces of my former bubbly employee are gone. "Branding has been approved, which was the most important step last week. The website refresh is almost complete. I've also prepared a social-media plan for the next three months that Mr. Bexley and I will review today. Now, we're focused on ordering signage, putting together direct mail and online advertising campaigns, and finalizing the plans for the grand reopening event. It's all been smooth sailing."

Her brilliant smile that follows triggers my own smile. She's always been quite stunning, but there's something otherworldly about her when she's passionate about something. That's why I'd always relied on Hope when it came to event planning. It was like she could read my poorly formulated thoughts and make them come to life in a way no one else could.

Dexter begins to look through everything as though there's time for him to change what I've already approved. It's insulting to both Hope and me, but Hope seems to be taking it all in stride. She must be used to the micromanaging prick, which explains the hard shell she wore when she stepped onto camp.

Another alert comes through the speakers, drawing my eyes to the security monitors once again to reveal a delivery truck making its way through the gates. "Excuse me while I sign for a delivery. Mr. Van Clark," I say, turning to him. "We have other offices if you'd like one."

Dexter looks around the room, his eyes settling on the couch pressed against the window. "No need. I can set up my things in here with Hope." He checks his watch. "I'll need to take off again tonight, but how about dinner before I go?" He looks between us both.

I can't help but look at Hope first, assessing her reaction. She looks

uncomfortable even though she's wearing a smile. The faster I can get her douche of a boss out of here, the better. But I also don't see the harm in having dinner with the man. It will only give me more time to provide Hope with all the glowing feedback she deserves.

"Dinner it is. If we eat early enough, we can get you on the nine o'clock ferry before the storm blows in. The last one runs after eleven, and they might shut it down if the weather is bad enough."

Dexter waves a hand. "I'd rather not rush tonight. I leave from SeaTac in the morning, so I have plenty of time."

Great, my mind rumbles.

"You don't happen to have a spare cabin I could stay in?"

A quick shake of my head comes next. "No, sorry. Nothing else is ready right now." I'm doing my best to contain my eagerness to get him out of here so Hope and I can continue where we left off.

Dexter grins. "Then the nine o'clock ferry it is."

With a final look between them and a subtle nod to Hope, I turn and walk back out the door. As I start to walk, I slip my hand in my shirt pocket and run my fingers against Hope's panties that have been burning a hole there all day. Knowing she's without them drives me mad. I can still hear the rip of the fabric after she asked me to fuck her. My briefs are still soaked from her juices. Her scent still lingers in my mind.

The only thing anyone can say I've ever been addicted to is running a successful camp. But with Hope, I'm all kinds of messed up over her. She's worse than an addiction. She's a temptation beyond my willpower. Even before she confessed that she didn't have a boyfriend, that she had just been seeing someone casually, it wasn't enough to stop me from obsessing over the woman who was always meant to be mine.

Knowing that the possibility is there—that we can finally have our chance—and that every kiss, every touch, every moment together is just one step closer to our forever... I'll never stop dreaming. I'll never give up.

Chapter Fourteen

HOPE

It's hard to meet Dexter's penetrating stare, but when I do, he's already speaking.

"Surprise." A wicked smile blooms on his face while he extends his arms out to the sides, like he's offering me a gift.

"Is this a work surprise or a personal surprise?" I must ask the question, considering Dexter's weakness for intercepting all the milestones of my projects so that the final decisions are always his.

Dexter looks at the door Anderson walked out of and goes to close it. When he turns back around, his gaze darkens. "I've missed you, Hope. Far more than I anticipated. After last night"—he bites his bottom lip, his eyes slipping to where my thighs are still wet from Anderson's mouth—"I simply couldn't stay away."

My chest constricts as panic sets in. I understand Dexter well enough to know what he expects right this very moment. "I'm flattered." I push out a smile and take a seat behind the desk to deter him from misinterpreting my signals. "I'm glad you could make it and see the place for yourself. What do you think about camp?"

Dexter wrinkles his face a little. "Would I vacation here? Not a chance in hell. Am I impressed with what Bexley did with the place to turn up the charm? Immensely. And he seems to be overwhelmingly happy with your services." He says this last part with a rise of his brows, as though there's hidden meaning in his words.

"Things have been moving along quite well, thank you. The work will be great for your portfolio. I still haven't shown you the grand reopening party plans, but I think you'll like them. Let me pull them up."

I start to enter the password into my computer to pull up the distraction

that I hope can keep any discussions of *us* at bay, but Dexter is already on the move. My pulse pounds heavily through my veins as I watch him in my peripheral until he's leaning against the desk, facing me.

"Bexley likes you."

I let out an uncomfortable laugh. "Well, yeah. That's a good thing, right?" I dare a look up at Dexter, my heart pounding in my chest.

"I mean," Dexter says, "he likes you, likes you. As in, he wants to fuck you."

My next breath comes quicker than I'm ready for, causing me to choke a little while my eyes widen. "Jesus, Dexter. Don't beat around the bush or anything." I let my eyes roll into the back of my head and aim my focus back at my computer, furiously tapping away while trying to remember what I was looking for to begin with.

"Clearly, you already know. You're avoiding the subject."

My jaw clenches as I try desperately to remain composed. "I'm avoiding the subject because it's inappropriate. Where on earth did that come from anyway?"

Dexter shrugs. "The way he speaks about you. He's clearly fond of you, and it's not a secret that you two have a history since you worked here and all, but I can't help but wonder if..."

I take in a slow, deep breath while waiting for him to finish his sentence. When he doesn't, I'm too curious not to ask. "Wonder if what?"

"If his feelings are returned. You think I haven't learned how to read your body language, Hope? After all these months of watching you and working with you and fucking you more times than I can count?" My neck and face heat at his words. "I can see that there's something different about you, just in these few minutes I've been in this office."

I lean back in my chair, worry filling my mind. "You're being ridiculous."

He tilts his head. "Am I? I'm realizing you never did tell me why you quit your job here."

"Then you aren't remembering my interview. I was very clear that I loved my job here, but I'd always wanted to move to the city and give a true marketing job a shot. Working here didn't really lend to the types of opportunities I thought I would have at Urgency."

Dexter frowns. "Thought you would have? As in, you haven't received those opportunities?"

I sigh, frustration blowing through me. This conversation is exhausting, just like all my conversations with Dexter lately. “You’ve given me plenty of opportunities that I’m very appreciative for, but you still don’t trust me. You still question every decision I make, client approved or not. You still show up to my job sites like you’re here to be some hero in case my client isn’t happy with my work. Is that really why you’re here, Dexter?”

His face turns a shade of red I don’t think I’ve ever seen before, and I swear he’s about to blow. “Are you fucking kidding me right now?” he booms. “I’m not here because I don’t trust your capabilities. I’m here to see *you*. A week ago, we were talking about making things official, and now you treat me as though you aren’t the least bit happy I’m here.”

I turn my head down, ashamed of all the things I’m hiding and scared of all the things I want but can’t gather the courage to say.

“Do you want me to go? Will that make you feel *trusted*?”

Yes, my mind screams, but I can’t possibly say that to him. As much of a jerk as he can be, and as hard as he’s being on me right now, he isn’t the one in the wrong here. I am. “No,” I say, almost too quietly for him to hear, so I clear my voice and meet his eyes. “You should stay. We have dinner plans with Anderson.”

There’s too much at stake. If I tell Dexter the truth—that it’s over, that I’m in love with the man I could never let go of—then I’ll be fired in a heartbeat. And then what? I’ll lose my job and all the training that comes with it. I’ll lose my promotion. I’ll lose my benefits, which include the college classes I’ve been taking in my spare time so I can finally get my bachelor’s degree. But then on the flip side, if I continue with this lie, I could lose Anderson.

I stand and place my hands on Dexter’s chest, attempting to calm him down before Anderson gets back. “I’m glad you’re here. Please, can we drop all of this for now?”

His expression softens almost instantaneously. He blows out a breath and shakes his head. “Yes, of course.” His hands slide around my waist as he tilts his chin, hinting at what he wants, but my lips belong to someone else now.

I peel myself away with an awkward laugh. “This isn’t your office, Dexter. Let’s not disrespect our client.”

A flash of anger lights up his eyes, and maybe a little understanding too. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”



* * *

“Tell me about growing up in Orcas Island,” Dexter says. “I can’t imagine living somewhere so... desolate.”

We’re down the road at Anderson’s favorite diner, a small hole-in-the-wall establishment that looks like it still exists in the sixties. I almost burst out laughing when we first arrived, knowing Anderson probably chose this place on purpose. He isn’t clueless about Dexter’s posh preferences and isn’t afraid to play to one’s discomforts if need be. Somehow, I sense that Anderson isn’t all that fond of my uptight boss. After Dexter’s subtle insult, I can understand why.

Seemingly unaffected, Anderson shrugs while toying with the straw to his glass of water. “It was all I knew. We worked hard and played even harder. My brothers and I started working as soon as we could walk, doing various chores around the land until we eventually figured out what suited us all best.”

Dexter leans back in his chair, a curious expression resting on his face. “So, that’s the simple life, huh?”

“If by simple you mean we’re not polluting the air with skyscrapers and fancy cars in traffic jams, then I suppose so.”

Dexter throws back his head and laughs before continuing with the inquisition. “What about schooling? Are there any good programs over here?”

“We have schools just like up in Seattle. Only in grade school our gym classes consisted more of nature walks, horseback riding, and swimming in the lake.”

“What about college?”

“There are plenty of opportunities on the island. There’s even a small college, which is where I went.”

Dexter looks taken aback. “You don’t say. What area of study?”

“Environmental Science, specifically Natural resources and conservation.”

Dexter chuckles. “Of course. I should have guessed.”

Anderson smiles. “And let me guess. You went to a private college and have a double major. Am I right?”

“Right so far.” Dexter winks and salutes the air with his glass of merlot. “Can you guess which ones?”

“Business, of course,” Anderson starts. “And marketing.”

Dexter takes a sip before responding. “I guess you think I’m fairly predictable.”

“Well, you’re definitely not one of us simple folk, now are you?” Anderson winks and salutes the air, mocking Dexter.

Tension has been building since the moment we all climbed into Anderson’s truck. By the time dinner is over and Dexter gets up to pay the bill at the front of the restaurant, I feel like I’m going to burst.

“That guy sure is a piece of work, isn’t he?”

I close my eyes, sigh, and then look back at Anderson. “He is, but you’ve been quite the opponent tonight.”

Anderson raises his brows. “The guy works for me, yet all he’s done is insult me. And don’t think I couldn’t hear him yelling at you when I left the office earlier. I swear to God, if he hadn’t quieted down when he did, I would have ejected him from this island so fast.”

“Quiet,” I hiss. “This isn’t *Survivor*. Dexter is intense, but he’s harmless.”

Anderson glares and shakes his head. “Bullshit. The guy is a grade-A prick. If you didn’t work for him, I’d have fired him by now.”

“Jesus, Anderson, please don’t say that,” I hiss. “This is my job at stake.”

Anderson presses forward against the table. “You could find a better one. He doesn’t respect you, and he sure as hell doesn’t trust you if he had to pop in with a surprise visit.” He blows out a breath. “He has no right to speak to you the way he does.”

“He’s my boss.”

“He’s not a very good one.”

I can’t argue with him there. And while I know I need to tell him the truth about Dexter’s visit, I certainly cannot do that here. The last thing I want is to cause a scene. “He’ll be gone soon. Just please, keep the peace until then.”

Anderson leans back into the booth, his jaw still tense, but he seems to be relaxing some. “I can still taste you,” he whispers while tugging on

something in his shirt pocket. When I recognize my ripped panties, I gasp.

I can feel my cheeks heat as I dart a look over at Dexter, who is still waiting for the bill. “You still have those?”

Anderson smiles. “Let’s just say they’ve acted as the perfect comfort for the day I’ve had. Whenever that prick says something idiotic, I think of those little tremors your body got when you came in my mouth.”

Fuck me, he’s not holding back. My heart rate spikes as my cheeks heat even more. “Anderson, please.”

He bites down on his lower lip and tucks my panties deep into his pocket. “Fine. But when your asshole boss leaves, all bets are off.”

As soon as we get back to camp, relief is already pouring off me in droves. Dexter will leave, and then I can finally tell Anderson what I should have told him from the beginning. Today was too close of a call for me to want to risk him finding out about Dexter and me any other way.

Anderson extends a hand to Dexter in the parking lot. “Great to meet you. Thanks for stopping by.”

They shake hands right when the sky begins to rumble at the first sign of tonight’s storm, but they don’t even seem to notice.

“Absolutely,” Dexter says. “Anything for my clients. I’m happy to hear Hope has been taking good care of you.”

“Great care.”

Dexter looks between us now, his eyes settling on me. “Hope, if you don’t mind. I’d like a private word before I take off.”

Anderson takes a few steps backward. “I’m going to go make my night rounds. Do you want me to keep the office unlocked for you, Hope?”

“No, I think I’m done for tonight. Thank you.”

Anderson nods and kind of lingers for another second before he turns and walks away. I can sense that he doesn’t want to leave me with Dexter, and part of me doesn’t want him to leave either. But I think we both know that my boss isn’t going anywhere until he has his final word with me.

Once Anderson has vanished from view, I turn to Dexter and pinch out a smile. “Thanks again for stopping by. You should probably hurry if you want to make that ferry.”

He doesn’t take his eyes from mine. “I have plenty of time.” His eyes soften. “It’s been tense today, and I’m sorry for that. I’ll take the blame. Maybe we should go back to your cabin and spend some time together.” He smiles like he’s finally giving me something I’ve been waiting for.

“We can have that talk about *us*,” he adds with a playful tilt of his head.

While he waits for my response, his entire demeanor reminds me of what made me fall hard for him on that private jet from Seattle to New York. The way he had smiled so sweetly then held my hand after I panicked and told him it was my first plane ride ever. The way he never left my side during every client meeting and event that week. The way he lingered outside my hotel room door every night before saying goodnight, like he wanted to invite himself inside but knew he couldn’t cross that line. Until our final jet ride back to Seattle when he eased my panic with a bottle of champagne and a slow kiss that led to hours of fucking.

Months later, I know Dexter well enough to know that when he wants to turn the charm on, he does so full throttle. But I’ve seen too many sides to him to know that these sweet moments are too few and far between. I deserve better. Or maybe he does.

Dread hammers through me. “I’m sorry, Dexter. I think that’s a bad idea.”

A deep frown creases his forehead. “Why?”

“Because,” I say with a laugh, “this isn’t some hotel we’re staying at. We’re at an empty campground. How is that going to look to our client if my boss sneaks into my cabin?”

Dexter glares. “And you’re worried about what our client thinks, why? It’s not like the guy can keep hiring Urgency for much longer anyway.”

I let out an exasperated breath. “I’m here to work. Why can’t you respect that?”

“Why are you being so difficult?”

“I don’t want to talk about *us*, okay?” I shouldn’t have blurted it out like that.

Dexter looks stricken, like I just slapped him across the face with my words. “Now or ever?”

I squeeze my eyes shut then open them again. “I don’t know. Things haven’t exactly been smooth sailing lately.”

He lets out a huff, his expression revealing his deep confusion. “Yeah, because I want something that you clearly don’t.”

I bury my head in my hands and shake my head. “You want me to make this big decision right this second, but I’m not ready.”

“I’m not asking you to marry me. I’m asking you to be my girlfriend. As hot as it is to fool around behind everyone’s backs, I want more with you.”

I growl and rip my hands from my face. “It’s like you’re not even listening to my concerns. You’re asking me to give up my reputation in the office. Do you know how hard it’s been to earn respect from my peers? Do I really need to explain to you that what you’re asking me to do is not as simple as you’re making it out to be? You might not care about your reputation, Dexter, but I care about mine. Deeply.”

“More than you care about me?”

Yes. “That’s unfair. You’re making me choose between my career and you.”

“And what if I am?”

Heat rises in my chest. Dexter might be giving me a choice, but he’s forcing my hand, and that’s just as bad as choosing for me. “Then I choose my career.”

He narrows his eyes, his body bending toward mine. “And who do you have to thank for your career, Miss Davies?”

I gasp. “Excuse me?”

“You walked into my office with inexperience, a lack of education, and an innocence that should have made me send you right back out the door, but I gave you a chance and saw potential. You were untouched by the corporate world, therefore moldable. And you dare stand here like your career is in your hands to own? Your career belongs to me, and so do you.” He wraps his arm around my waist and yanks me to him.

Before I can stop him, his mouth slams on mine.

One week ago, I would have melted beneath Dexter’s fire. I would have crawled onto my knees and devoured his cock like only a powerful woman could. I would have let him ravage me on the hood of his car in this empty parking lot if he’d wanted. But now... now all I can think about is Anderson and my love for him that never left. If anything, it’s only gotten stronger.

I yank my lips from Dexter’s, rage filling my entire body. The smirk across Dexter’s face when his eyes slip to something over my shoulder makes it no better. “Oops. Looks like we’ve been spotted.”

My head snaps toward whatever he’s referring to, and my heart instantly drops into my feet when I see Anderson standing there on the trail, his face cloaked by the surrounding trees’ shadows, but it’s undoubtedly him. Like he was waiting for me this whole time, only to witness me kissing another man.

Anderson takes one step backward then another until he’s gone.

I’m going to be sick.

I turn back to a chuckling Dexter and shove him so hard and unexpectedly that his back hits his driver's door with a thud. "What the fuck, Hope?"

"Leave."

Fury crowds his brow. "What about us?"

I lift my hands in the air and take a step back. "We're over. I'll work with you, I'll work for you, but I won't be anything more to you. From now on, it's business only."

"You don't mean that." He tilts his head, his breathing coming harder. "I came all the way here to see you, and this is the thanks I get?"

I take another step back. "I'm sorry you had to waste the gas money. Feel free to take it out of my next paycheck."

His palms slam against his face then drag down his skin. Rejection isn't something Dexter is used to. "Stop. Now. This isn't how today was supposed to go. Look, I get it. You're stressed and focused on your promotion. But there's no need to be. Maybe we just need to take a breath and talk about this later."

For a successful entrepreneur, Dexter is a shitty listener. "I won't change my mind."

He lets out another frustrated breath, this one resembling something like defeat. "So that's it, huh? It's over before it ever fucking began, and I don't even understand why." He shakes his head like he's trying to put together a puzzle in his mind. Moments later, something new appears in his eyes. A realization that knots my belly. His eyes narrow. "This is about Bexley, isn't it? Are you sleeping with him?"

"No." My answer comes too quick and too loud, causing his glare to harden.

"You two have a history." He's searching my face like he'll find all my secrets there. "He's very complimentary of you, and you're very protective of him." His eyes dart over my shoulder to where he saw Anderson watching us earlier. "And why the fuck was he waiting in the woods for you?"

Everything is short-circuiting in my body while another wave of panic washes over me. All I know is that if I tell Dexter the truth about Anderson, it will hurt him a hell of a lot more than he's hurting now. I can't do that to him after everything he's done for me.

"Maybe he didn't want me to walk alone in the dark," I suggest.

He studies me again like he's conflicted, like he wants to believe me but

can't. With a final huff, he rips his door open with one hand then points at me. "If I find out you're lying, you can kiss your precious career goodbye. I won't have my employees fucking my clients on my dime. I'm not your pimp."

"Really?" I tilt my head. "Aren't you the one who wanted me to show a little cleavage to win Anderson over in the first place? Make up your mind, Dexter."

Daggers shoot from his eyes one last time before he speeds off, spraying gravel everywhere in the lot before his car finally disappears through the entrance gates.

Chapter Fifteen

ANDERSON

Tires spin through the gravel of the parking lot, a sound that would normally send my tolerance needle into the red, but no more fury is left inside me after what I just witnessed. If I could take an eraser to my brain, I would scrape the thing so damn clean and take the rest of my memory with it. The walls of my chest feel like they're closing in on my heart.

Just when I was starting to think my life was finally turning around, a storm comes in threatening to destroy what I love most—yet again. I may have lost my family, but somehow, I know it would all be okay if Hope was back in my life. And here she was, my dream girl, closer to being mine than ever before—and then I catch her wrapped up in a kiss with Dexter Van Douche.

My hand latches on to a thick twig from a tree branch. I yank on it hard while a growl rips from my throat. It snaps from the tree, and I toss it deep into the woods. It doesn't make me feel better. If anything, the splinters that lodged into my skin make me feel worse. Weak. There's no pain bigger than this type of heartbreak. The kind that's like laughter in my face. Payback for the damage I did to Hope's heart a year ago. I guess I deserve this.

Raindrops start to fall—slowly at first and then quicker as the moments pass. The wind whistles as leaves rip from the trees, and the sky rumbles. Of course the sky would choose this fucking moment to storm. I knew it was coming. I just didn't realize it would be here to destroy my life once again.

“Anderson, wait.” Hope's faint voice still sounds far away, so I pick up the pace. Nothing good can come from facing her right now. Not when all I see is red.

Her footsteps grow faster, louder, until she's practically running to catch up to me at the opening to the new cabins.

“Anderson, please stop,” she cries. “Let’s talk about this.”

I swivel around, her presence gas to the fire we’ve already lit. I can’t put all the blame on her since I was the one who carried the match to begin with, but I can sure as hell remove myself from the flames. “Talking would have been a nice thing to do before I had to witness your tongue down Dexter’s throat.” I point toward the parking lot while glaring back at her. “You’re having a fling with your boss? Which means *he* sent the flowers here. I’m a fucking fool.”

“You’re not a fool.” Her voice shakes. “I was going to tell you.”

“When?”

“He showed up here unexpectedly. I would have said something when he got here, but you took off before I had a chance. Then I was going to tell you as soon as he was gone.” She covers her mouth with her hands before ripping them away from her face. “Dexter and I had something, but it’s over. I swear.”

None of what she's saying makes me feel any better. “Really?” I yell. “Because he had his hands all over you back there. That didn’t look like it was over to me.”

“I know what you saw, and I’m so sorry.” Her face is all crumbled up like she’s about to cry, and I hate that I want to hug her. “This is so awful. I don’t even know what to say right now.”

“Then say nothing,” I snap. “What’s the use? We’re just going to hurt each other all over again. Save yourself, Hope. Go back to Dexter. Work your fancy job. Drive your expensive car. Eat your five-star meals. I can’t compete with any of that.”

“I’m not asking you to compete. Don’t you get it? It’s Dexter who can’t compete with you.” She visibly shakes as the first tear slips down her face. “It’s always been you, Anderson. Whether I wanted that to be true or not, there’s never been anyone else. Not anyone who reaches me as deeply as you do.”

It’s like she’s right there inside my chest, squeezing and yanking it toward her, but somehow, it stays intact. After what I witnessed minutes ago, I would have sworn that it was about to shatter like shrapnel all over these goddamn woods.

“You know this is going to end badly, right? You’ve been fucking your boss,” I spit out. “And if you end things with him, then what? You get fired?”

“I already ended it, and he didn’t fire me. He won’t unless his suspicions

prove to be right.”

I search her eyes. “Suspicious?”

She nods. “He asked if I was fucking you. I told him no. He’s not convinced.”

“Well, you didn’t lie.” There’s a hint of bitterness in my tone along with a mix of other emotions that rattle my core. I’m jealous. Jealous that a prick like Dexter got to be intimate with Hope before me. I’m angry at myself for being the arms that pushed her in his direction. I’m sad at the fact that what she told Dexter wasn’t a lie. I’m also tired. Tired of pretending that I have a chance of surviving a life without Hope in it. I don’t.

“I didn’t lie, but I also didn’t tell him the truth. He might be an asshole at times, but he’s not a terrible guy. I respect him in the business sense, and I’m grateful to him for all the opportunities he’s given me. If he knew the truth, it would crush him.”

I hear what she’s saying and I know she isn’t wrong, but it still hurts like hell. “So, what? You’re going to continue working with him? I don’t know how I feel about that.”

“I’m afraid you don’t get to have a say. It’s my career, my future, my decision.” Another set of tears falls down her cheeks, twisting my heart even more.

She’s so fucking stubborn, but what I want for her today isn’t any different than what I wanted for her a year ago. I’ve only ever wanted her to be happy. “So then we’re right back where we started, aren’t we? Only this time you aren’t choosing me. You’re choosing Seattle.”

“I’m choosing *me*.” She jabs a finger into her chest. “What we have doesn’t have to change. You said it yourself.”

Fury kicks in my chest. “I said that before I knew you were having a fling with your boss. This changes things.”

Her chin quivers. “What is this, Anderson? Are you trying to make this decision easy for me too? Because I swear to God if you force my hand in either direction, you won’t get a third chance.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” Fear billows through me at the thought of her leaving. “But what do I do? Let you go again? Beg you to stay? I don’t know which will make you resent me less.”

Hope’s forehead creases. “You’re afraid of me resenting you? That’s what I’ve been doing for the past twelve months. I wanted to hate you. If you had a single clue of just how badly I tried to hate you, you might begin to

understand how hard it was for me to come back here.”

“Maybe you should hate me,” I choke out. “That would make your life so much easier.”

She nods, her chin quivering. “Probably, yes. But I’m not looking for easy. I want you. I also want to be the one who gets to make decisions that impact my life. I’m not going to let you take that away from me again.” She blows past me toward her cabin. She’s halfway there when she turns around and starts to walk backward. “Don’t forget how we got here in the first place. You pushed me away, remember? Maybe you should think twice before you do it again.”

She turns back around, but I’m right on her heels. The rain is falling harder now, drenching us both. “I’ll do whatever you want me to do,” I yell so she can hear me over the downpour. “Just don’t walk away, please.”

Her entire body is shaking now, but it’s the crack of thunder followed by the lightning bolting through the sky that makes her jump straight out of her boots.

I step closer so there’s nothing between us but a mere inch of air. Call it instinct, call it love, but my arms wrap around her so fast that my head is spinning. Her eyes are wet, and I’m not sure if it’s from the rain or from her sadness, but I hate that I’ve ever played a part in her unhappiness.

“I’m sorry.” Two whispered words against her mouth, and I feel her melt into my arms. “I just want to keep you.”

Her lids press together before she returns my gaze. “You have me.”

When my mouth finds hers, a sigh of relief rockets through my chest. I hold her to me tightly, ignoring the cold rain falling on us and bleeding into our kiss. All I want to do is live in this moment forever.

Her lips are warm and plush, like a pillow resting in front of the fire.

Her tongue is gentle, eager, but with a hint of timidity that makes me want her more.

Her arms are strong and firm, wrapping me like a weighted blanket.

She’s everything I could ever need.

When I feel her first shiver from the cold, I murmur against her wet lips. “Let’s go inside.”

She nods, and we run for shelter.

We race into her cabin, our clothes already soaked through. I search the closet for blankets while she flips the switch to the fireplace. When we meet again in the middle of the room, she’s struggling to unzip the back of her red

dress. I stand behind her and take over, lowering the zipper slowly enough that I can appreciate every inch of her silky skin until the fabric falls to the floor.

I suck in a breath when her bare ass comes into view, compliments of the ripped panties that still sit in my pocket. My mouth lands on the back of her neck, and I close the distance, my erection rapidly thickening between her firm cheeks. I snake an arm around her, placing my palm on her stomach while teasing her neck with my tongue.

She shivers, and I realize how cold she must be with my wet clothes pressed to her back, so I scramble out of them, shedding each layer while she strips free of her bra, until we're nothing but two naked bodies, souls bared and hearts beating.

My eyes stay on hers as I toss a heavy blanket over her shoulders and pull her toward me. Our wet bodies collide, like sin and desire. Her breasts heave into me with each breath, and my cock hardens against her soft stomach without a single ounce of hesitation. I rub her back, comforting her as well as myself. "Do you really have to go back to Seattle at the end of the week?" I ask softly.

"I do." She looks up, our eyes connect, and it's like there's no fight between us at all.

"That gives us five days if you stay the weekend."

She nods. "Let's not waste a second of it."

She stole the words right from my heart. We'll figure this out. We have to.

I lean down again and capture her lips with mine, molding to them effortlessly as if this is a dance we've done a million times before. I walk her backward toward her bed and lay her down, watching as her long, brown hair fans around her head.

My heart gallops like a stampede through the wild as I sit back on my knees and take in Hope's beauty. Every glistening morsel of skin is beyond intoxicating. I've touched her, tasted her, and watched her sweet pussy pulse out her excitement, but I've yet to see her like this. Totally bare. Wholly beautiful. Mine.

I reach for my aching erection and stroke myself while she watches with a wide-eyed gaze. It's like she's never seen anything like it. Her mouth parts then she sits up on her knees and reaches for me, replacing my hand with hers. "Oh my," she says when she's got a good grip. "I should be angry at

you for keeping this away from me for so many years.” She lengthens her strokes. “You’re so big.”

My whole body is on fire with her touch, and her words make me want to do dirty, filthy, unholy things to her. “As long as you take that anger out on me in bed, it’s all yours.” I look down just as a bead of cream drips from my tip. She catches it with the pad of her thumb and smears it around.

Her strokes continue, slow but firm, twisting me at the base while her teeth dig into my shoulder. My head lolls back as I groan. This feels way too fucking good to be real. It’s not even the sensation itself—it’s the fact that the hand wrapped around me belongs to Hope.

Her kisses feather from my shoulder, up my chin, and to my lips. “I need to see if you fit,” she whispers. At first, I think she’s talking about intercourse, but then she slips away from my lips, sinks down on all fours, save for the hand that’s feeding me into her mouth.

She tastes me first—a lick, a tease—but it’s enough to make my mind explode and my cock to jerk in her fist.

“Holy shit.”

She bats her eyes up at me, a look of concern flitting across her features, then she wraps her lips around my tip and moans. She continues to ease around me, her mouth stretched wide, and I know it will be seconds before my release explodes down her throat. As much as I’m anticipating that moment, I’m greatly enjoying this one.

“Fuck. Hope. I’m going to—”

I’m cut off by her quick movement as her mouth slips away, her breathing heavy. My pending release subsides, and I think I might just die.

“Don’t come yet.” She shakes her head and sits up. “Not yet.”

A hand presses against my chest and pushes, causing me to fall onto my back. I open my eyes to find Hope above me, hair falling around her shoulders as she leans in, pressing her lips to mine. “I’ve waited too many years for this. No condom, okay?”

I drag in a breath, hypnotized by her beautiful green and blue eyes and the passion behind them. “I might not last long.”

She smiles. “I’m willing to go as many times as it takes to brand this night into your memory, Anderson Bexley.”

My hands hold on to the side of her face. “Oh, you’ve already done that, Hope. All you had to do was exist.”

Chapter Sixteen

HOPE

He looks up at me like I'm the last woman on Earth. Eyes roaming my body as though he's greedy for all the sins he's about to commit. I'm no better. I just mounted him like a lioness, taking the reins and ready to devour. He's mine. Body, heart, and soul. I can feel it in our kiss, in every touch. He spent years denying me what I always knew was mine, and I spent the past year denying him of the exact thing. I almost can't believe that we're here together right now.

I stroke him toward me, struggling to keep hold of his monster cock—it's already slick with excitement and fully ready to annihilate me in the best way. The thought of trying to fit him inside me makes me shiver with anticipation.

With one palm pressing down on his chest, I center his tip below my opening and sink enough to get a feel for what is about to enter me. "You're going to hurt me, aren't you, Bexley?"

A faint smile crosses his face before he bites down on his bottom lip. "Maybe just for a minute."

He looks down at where we both connect. I do the same while I sink around him again, gasping at the instant pressure that comes from his stretch. His hands grip my waist, fingers digging into my skin, only adding to the pleasure as another inch disappears inside me. My heart is racing, my blood pumping so fast and hard that I feel like I could explode with the pressure alone. He helps ease me down until I've taken him whole and nothing is left between us save for our slick bodies and eager breaths.

I rock slightly and moan at the fullness, slowly at first while I get used to the feel of him, if that's even possible. Palms find my breasts and squeeze while hips roll up into me, driving him deeper. My lids burst wide open, and I

gasp again, not at all ready for the explosion that is sure to follow this connection.

His eyes find mine. "Are you okay?"

"Better than okay." I rock against him again and again, keeping my rhythm slow but steady as I acclimate to his thickness.

"You feel incredible, Hope. Like a dream I never want to wake from."

"I don't want to wake up either. Let's stay like this forever."

One hand stays on my breast while the other slips down to my clit. He rubs me slowly. "I'm not going to last long like this," he rasps before his tongue wets his bottom lip. "You're so damn beautiful and sexy as sin." He drops his hand from my breast and smacks my ass before squeezing it while thrusting up into me.

A guttural moan escapes me as I arch my back, the pleasure blasting me fast and hard. We fit like hand and glove, a tight but glorious connection that only adds to the building tension. Years of unrequited love, months of loss, days of resistance. It's all created a frenzy of emotions lumped together with a raging attraction that neither of us want to bottle anymore. It's about to blow in more ways than one.

I bring myself down and kiss him deeply, loving the way he kisses me back with just as much passion. He flips me onto my back, scoops one arm around my leg so that my knee presses into my chest, and then he lunges into me, all without taking his mouth from mine.

"Fuck," Anderson curses. "I can't stop it."

Meanwhile, my own volcano is threatening to erupt inside me. "Don't stop," I breathe. "I'm close too."

His head falls onto my chest, and his hips rock into me harder and harder until his final quick thrusts come at the same time my eruption detonates like tiny earthquakes deep inside my body.

He kisses me as we fall from climax, our bodies soaked from rain and sweat while our tangled breaths become one. We may not have our lives figured out, but that was a damn good start to our forever.



* * *

It's midnight when I finally drag Anderson from bed so we can lie in front of the fire. Neither of us can sleep, and after several rounds of mind-numbing sex, all I want is to fall asleep in his arms.

Another crack of thunder makes him pull me closer beneath the blanket. "You okay?"

I nod and bury my head in his chest. "Storms aren't scary with you."

He chuckles. I can feel his chest vibrate with the sound. "I meant... down there. Did I hurt you?"

Biting down on my lip, I smile and look up at him. "Sorry to burst your bubble, but it wasn't my first time, Anderson."

He glares and brings his forehead to mine. "We're just going to pretend we were both virgins before tonight."

"Might as well have been." I swallow. "It's never felt like that for me before. And, by the way, no man has ever made me orgasm during oral before."

His eyes get so big, I wouldn't be surprised if they burst from his sockets. "You're lying."

I shake my head, ashamed to admit this for the first time. "I swear. I didn't even think it was possible for me, honestly. I thought there was something wrong with me. Turns out, some people need deep emotional connections to achieve an orgasm that way."

"But not in other ways? You seemed to have a nice little orgasm in your room while on the phone with your boss," Anderson reminds me.

"Yeah, I don't usually have a problem when I masturbate or through intercourse, but I wasn't thinking about him." I kiss Anderson's lips softly. "I was thinking about you and how hot you looked at the stables earlier that day."

Anderson groans and rubs his newly hard length against my stomach.

“Fuck, I was really hoping that you were thinking about me that night. Since we’re confessing sex stories... you should know that the first time I ever had a sex dream about you was the first night I met you.”

My jaw drops hard. “Really?”

He squeezes his eyes shut while nodding and laughing. “I did, and I felt so guilty when I saw you the next day. I think I tried to avoid you as much as possible after that for a while.”

I smack his chest. “No wonder. I was certain you hated me at first.”

“It was definitely the opposite. All I kept thinking about was how you were twenty-two and so adorably sweet and innocent. But I couldn’t take my eyes off you. Your infectious laughter drew me to you every single time you were near. And then your smile kept me. If you only knew how badly I wanted to get you alone to try to learn something new about you. I just loved being around you.”

He blinks, and I swear there’s moisture forming in his eyes.

“You reminded me how to be happy.” He bows his head slightly. “And by admitting that, I feel guilty, because you aren’t responsible for my happiness, but I can’t imagine happiness without you in that same picture.” His eyes search mine. “Trust me, I tried.”

It feels like fireworks are shooting from my heart—whizzing, and squealing, and exploding into the best of moments. “Good,” I say with a small smile. “Because you’re in my happy picture too.”

He leans in to kiss me, groaning before he pulls away. “There’s something I’ve always wondered, but I don’t know—I guess I was too afraid to ask.” His gaze flickers over me like he’s considering how to phrase his words. “How did you wind up here in the first place?”

His question hits me hard. Anderson and I may have spent a lot of time together, but there were so many things we both kept hidden. Looking back, I’m not even sure why.

“Well,” I say while drawing an invisible line down his chest with my finger. “When I got kicked out of college for not being able to pay my tuition, I went home to see my mom. I don’t know why I thought she’d find it in her heart to be a mom for once. Looking back, I was so stupid. But I was the first one in my family to even attempt college, and I’d worked so damn hard, but I failed.” I swallow, hating this story as much as I want to tell it. “When I got to her home, she was shooting up on the couch. Didn’t even recognize me at first. And then after I reminded her who I was, she kicked me out of the

house, telling me she'd already sold and thrown out all my things. So I walked out of the house a homeless twenty-two-year-old with nowhere to go."

"Jesus," Anderson says, his expression broken for me. He holds me tighter and kisses my forehead. "How'd you find Camp Dakota?"

I smile, because this is the good part of the story. "A college friend of mine let me stay with her family the next summer. I worked a waitressing job within walking distance from their house, and my goal was to save up enough to afford a bus ticket and a little extra to find a place somewhere as far from Seattle as possible. But one day, my friend invited me out on her boat with some friends, and I went. We were out all day, making a pass around Orcas Island. That's when I first saw you. You were sitting at the edge of the dock. I couldn't get over how handsome you were. But you also looked sad." I nuzzle his nose with mine. "All I wanted to do was make you smile. My friend told me about Camp Dakota and what you all did here, and I was intrigued. So instead of getting the bus ticket across the country, I came here. And I found you." I suck in a breath, ready to hear how crazy I just sounded by stalking my way into his heart.

Instead, a tear slips from his eyes, his mouth moves to my ear, and the sweetest whisper I've ever heard floats past his lips and straight into my heart.

"I saw you that day too. And I never stopped."

Chapter Seventeen

HOPE

The sound of a drill squealing outside my window grips me in my slumber. The thud of boots hitting the wooden porch brings a sigh from my throat. It's just Anderson. Up to something, but I'm still too weighted with sleep to try to figure out what he's doing. Instead, I sigh and roll to my side while memories of last night rain down on me like it's all happening again in real time.

Our kiss in the rain.

Us racing into the cabin during the storm.

Our naked bodies colliding in the hottest sex I'd ever experienced.

Our midnight confessions.

Everything about last night feels like a dream that I never want to wake up from, so I curl into the memories a little bit longer. Why not? I worked through the weekend to get ahead of my work, and my boss isn't here. And I suspect I won't have a job at Urgency for much longer, especially not once Dexter finds out that Anderson is, in fact, more than a client. I'm convinced Dexter will find a way to fire me. It's only a matter of time.

A sick feeling creeps into my gut. It's not like I have my heart set on staying at Urgency anymore, but I love my job and the challenge it provides. Before I stepped foot in that downtown Seattle office, I never would have imagined that I was capable of the things I've accomplished. And now, it's all about to go to shit. A year's worth of work, gone like it was nothing. I'll never know what could have been, and that thought is crushing.

Feeling restless, I rip off the covers and pull on a pair of navy sweats and a white tank top. Bending at the waist, I lean over my desk and tug the cream curtain to the side to find Anderson hooking one side of the bed swing into the porch overhang. His expression is worn with concentration as dark denim hugs his perfect ass. He's shirtless, too, his tanned skin slick with sweat. I

watch as he walks to the other side of the bed to hang that end and smile.

That is, until I see him start to place a puke-green cushion on the bed's frame. I rush outside to stop him. "No, you don't." I snatch the cushion from him and toss it to the side.

He regards me with amusement before his focus shifts to my clothed, but braless, chest. "Well, good morning to you, beautiful."

I roll my eyes while internally swooning from the endearment. "You were about to commit a felony. You should be thanking me for saving you from a lifelong sentence." I point to the cushion I just tossed. "That shit is hideous."

When I turn back to him, he's smirking.

"Well, you weren't there to help me pick out the fabric before the seamstress sewed it all up." He reaches down and picks the cushion back up. "It stays."

I start to reach for it again, but he catches my hand and tugs me to him. "I'll make you a deal." His voice is velvety soft as though he just dunked it in a warm glass of tea.

"We aren't making a deal that involves puke-green cushions. Those need to go, Anderson."

He chuckles and shakes his head. "I'll let you pick out a new color."

"You will?" I narrow my eyes. "Is there a condition in there somewhere?"

"Of course," he says before picking me up and wrapping my legs around his waist. "I want a good-morning kiss first."

I smile and lean in, touching my nose to his. "You drive a hard bargain, but okay."

He raises his brows. "Oh, I'm not done. You also have to agree to come with me on a boat ride today. I have some errands to run, and I want you with me." He skims his full lips against mine. "Like old times."

There isn't an excuse in the world that could keep me away from that offer. "You have yourself a deal."

He smiles and presses his lips to mine in a gentle caress. I press back, meeting him in a slow, chest-fluttering kiss. It's the kind of kiss that has the power to stretch time and heal wounds, cocooning us in a new start.

Last night was amazing, but something about this morning makes me feel everything deeper. Maybe it's the fact that last night wasn't just a dream. It was real. We're real. And we're finally together.

Nothing else matters.

Eventually, he carries me inside, not depositing me until I land on the

counter. I laugh when I realize we're in my bathroom. "What are we doing?"

"I need to shower," he says simply while leaning over and turning the nozzle.

Tilting my head, I smile. "And I'm in here because?"

He makes a face as if the answer is obvious. "What? You don't like showers?"

"I love them, but there's not much room in there." I raise my brows while looking directly at the tiny box of a glass shower. "You sure we can fit?"

He grips the bottom hem of my shirt and slides it up and over my head. "I think we can manage." Then, with a tug of my sweats, he slides those off me next. His gaze slides up and down my body, and he bites down on his lip. "I'll try to be good," he promises. Then he takes off his clothes and steps into the water.

After I jump off the counter and meet him under the water, he shuts the glass door behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. "You okay?"

Somehow, the question feels heavy. *Am I okay?* Yes and no, but how am I supposed to tell Anderson that? We're finally together. It's what I dreamt about for so long, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit that the events of yesterday and their consequences have me on edge.

"Obviously, I'm happy about us. I just don't know what it all means for my career."

"Hope," he says gently, "I'm not asking you to choose me over your career. You've worked hard to get to where you are. I hate that you have to work with that prick."

I sigh. "I know, and I agree. Which is why I'm going to start looking for a new job on Monday." I frown and look up at him. "But what does that mean for your grand reopening? They'll put someone else on the job." My thoughts sour when Mallory's sleek red mane of perfect hair appears in my mind. "This is going to sound so selfish, but I had my heart set on being the one to help you."

He cups my face in his large palm, and I lean into the comfort. "If you think for a second that I'll continue working with Van Clark once you're no longer employed then you're wrong. Silver specifically signed that contract on the basis that you would be the project manager. If you're gone, so is the deal."

I don't feel as confident as Anderson that it will be so easy. "I think you're underestimating Dexter. He has no clue that you and I are together,

and he desperately wants your business. He mentioned something about how big the potential is because of your connections.” I make a face. “I still don’t understand what that means.”

Anderson lets out a laugh and rolls his eyes to the ceiling. “Wow. No wonder he took such an interest in my brother.” Anderson smiles down at me. “Jamison’s Seattle clients are booming right now, thanks to him. Dexter probably wants his business.”

“You think?”

Anderson nods. “Yeah. In fact, it makes so much sense now. Camp Bexley doesn’t fit the bill to be a huge potential moneymaker for Van Clark. It’s not this project he cares about, but he sure as hell won’t want to fuck it up.”

I frown, wishing I felt a little better about the situation. “I still don’t want to work for him.”

“Good.” His hands slip from my face to my shoulders. “Because I don’t want you to work for him either.” He massages my shoulders gently. “You want my advice?”

I nod. “Yes, please.”

“Stay for the project. I’ll even see if I can get your time here extended a couple weeks.” He winks. “Then at least you won’t have to see him or hear from him much. Just finish your work, help me with the grand opening, and look for a job while you’re here. When you get back to Seattle... quit.”



* * *

The boat ride is a much-needed afternoon getaway. We travel from island to island while Anderson meets with local business owners sampling food, buying furniture, and signing contracts for future business. Watching him network the way he does, so naturally and effortlessly, reminds me exactly why I fell for him to begin with.

He's the complete opposite of Dexter. Anderson doesn't need to be flashy to succeed. He doesn't need to show off his possessions in order to get noticed. He's just... himself. It amazes me that I never caught that contrast when I was getting so wrapped up in the corporate game in Seattle. Or maybe my subconscious was more aware than I was, choosing the opposite of what broke my heart to begin with.

We stop for dinner at a seafood restaurant on San Juan island and watch the orcas dance near the shoreline. It's always so peaceful out here, with the water sloshing into the rocks and cloud cover casting the perfect haze beneath the sun. Seagulls squawk around us, and yachts pass by slowly. The ambience of it all helps to ease my mind's fears of what's to come. I realize nothing else really matters, not when I have Anderson.

We pay the bill and reboard the boat then head back to Camp Bexley. It's chillier than when we left this morning, leaving me shivering in my light jacket. "Come here," Anderson calls to where I sit on the passenger side of the boat.

I stand and go to him, eager for his warmth. He pulls me in and wraps his arm around me, planting a kiss on the side of my head when I'm safely in his arms. "Spend the night at my place?" He sounds hopeful, like there's a possibility that I might say no.

My heart skips a beat. Anderson has no idea that I always jumped when Silver invited me to the Bexley household. It felt like a privilege to be there, especially when Anderson was around.

Smiling, I curl deeper into his side. "Only if you make me a fire."

"Oh, I'll do more than make you a fire." I look up in time to catch him wiggling his eyebrows. "I think a repeat performance from last night is in our future."

"I'm looking forward to it."

He chuckles and focuses on pulling the boat into the small marina. I'm dropping the fenders while Anderson lines up the side of the boat with the dock when I see a figure walking from the shadows into the yellow lantern light. Fear quickens my chest. My first thought is that it's Dexter, back for another fight. But when the man gets closer, it takes a mere second to recognize him from countless photos around Camp Bexley.

I turn to find Anderson's eyes widening in surprise at the sight of his younger brother. "Well, shit," he mutters so only I can hear. "This can't be good."

Chapter Eighteen

ANDERSON

“What the hell are you doing here?” My quickened pulse turns my question into something far harsher than I intended. In my defense, it’s been seven years since he stepped foot on this land. The morning after Cayson left for the Air Force, Jamison fled without a single warning. It wasn’t until he called months later that I learned he’d been planning to leave all along. I was crushed.

Jamison wasn’t just my brother. He was my best friend. Losing him tore me up inside almost as much as losing Ty, considering Jami had a choice in the matter. I expected Benson and Cayson to leave. But Jami was my ride or die.

“Nice to see you, too, brother.” His smooth jaw ticks once then again. The angry flair in his golden eyes brings out the hint of green that always stood out in a lineup of us Bexley brothers. Jami slows to a complete standstill, his hard expression on me. “I’ve been trying to call you since yesterday.”

This news surprises me until I remember the events of the past two days. I haven’t had my phone on me since I locked it up in my office before dinner yesterday, which I’m kicking myself for now. Whatever Jami’s visit is about cannot be good. Not with the way his subdued tone matches his deep frown.

“Sorry. I’ve been caught up in some stuff.” I slip my hand into Hope’s and squeeze, not sure if it’s for me or her. “Something wrong with Dad?”

Jami’s frown deepens. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Okay. Then help me out here. I thought you said you would never step foot on this land again.”

His gaze travels from Hope to me. “I’ve been in town for a couple of days with—um—work stuff. I called to see if you wanted to meet up. When you

didn't answer, I decided to stop by and see if everything was okay."

I tilt my head, confused. "Are you sure everything's okay with you?"

Jami laughs like he knows this whole encounter is awkward. "I guess I just wanted to see you, brother. That okay?"

Hope squeezes my hand, and it's the kick in the pants I need to respond. Maybe I'm shocked, or maybe I don't believe my brother about why he says he's in town. There's got to be something more. At least he's here. "Well, all right then."

Hope takes that opportunity to step forward with a smile and an extended hand. "Hi, Jamison. I'm Hope."

Jamison at least has the courtesy to take her hand. "Nice to meet you, Hope."

"It's nice to meet you, too, Jamison. I've heard a lot about you and your brothers from Anderson and Silver."

Recognition dawns on Jamison's face. "Aww, Hope. Silver's best friend. I'm sorry we haven't had a chance to meet until now." Jamison looks at me like more puzzle pieces are clicking together in his brain. "I didn't know you two were together."

Hope darts a glance at me, and we both smile. "It's a new thing," she says. "Silver doesn't even know yet." She looks at me again. "I can give you two some time alone and head back to my cabin."

Jamison holds up a hand. "Actually, I'm beat tonight." His gaze settles on me. "Mind if we catch up in the morning? I was hoping I could crash here, at least for the night. Or, I don't know..." He drags his fingers through his hair, frustration and worry written all over his face. "Maybe longer, so we can catch up."

"Of course." My chest tightens, and I try not to let my emotions get the better of me. "Do you want to stay in your old room or one of the cabins?"

Jamison looks toward the campground and blows out a breath. "Shit, dude. I don't think I can stay in one of those old, dingy cabins." He looks at me with raised brows. "The house is yours now?"

"The house belongs to all of us."

"Nah," he says with a wave of his hand. "It's yours. You're the one still holed up here."

Hearing him talk like our home is a prison makes me sick. My dreams of bringing the family together again seems to get further and further away the longer time goes on, no matter what I do.

“The cabins are nice,” Hope chimes in, probably sensing my discomfort. “Trust me, I used to work here and I wouldn’t have recommended them before but”—she squeezes my side—“Anderson’s really fixed up the place. You should have a look around.”

Jami quirks a brow. “That right?”

There’s too much tension in my body to reply. Maybe I’m offended by his instant reaction to where we grew up, or maybe it’s the fact that he has to question me, but I’m in no mood to dole out props to myself in an effort to earn his respect. “Camp’s closed for renovations. Staff won’t start coming back until this weekend. Stay wherever you’d like. Hope and I are going to head to the house now.”

Jami looks between us again as though he’s trying to figure out what we are together or just how serious it is between us. If only he knew. “Go on. I’ll take your girl’s word for it and find a cabin.”

“Make sure you take the new North Trail down Jamison Way,” Hope tells him. “You’ll see a cluster of cabins there. They’re all unlocked.”

Jamison chuckles softly. “Jamison Way, huh? You named a trail after me?”

I clap Jami on the back and squeeze. “I named the new trails after all of you.”

Jami’s eyes search mine like he’s afraid to ask his next question. “Even Ty?”

I nod. “Of course. There’s a new East Trail that leads to the stables. You won’t be able to miss it.”

Emotion flickers in my brother’s eyes, and then he nods one last time before turning around.

I swallow, and in a panic I yell out before he can get too far away. “I’m glad you’re here, Jami. I’ll catch up with you in the morning.”

Jami halts for a second, his shoulders stiffening, before he resumes his descent into the darkness.



* * *

“Want anything to drink?” I ask Hope as soon as we’re inside my house. After going to my office to grab my phone, we came straight there.

“What are you drinking?”

I think long and hard about that question. Hard liquor would hit the spot right now, but one drink will only lead to an entire bottle after my brother’s unexpected arrival. I need to be sober right now. “Water.”

“Make that two.”

I head into the kitchen, and when I come out with two ice waters, Hope already has started the fire in the living room. “You sure your brother isn’t coming back here tonight? I can make myself scarce if needed.”

I know Hope would be completely fine with leaving if that’s what I want, but it’s the absolute last thing I want. “You’re not going anywhere. Jami’s mind is probably blown right now. Trust me. Once upon a time, he was as big of a dreamer about this place as me.”

Hope takes a sip of her water. “What happened?”

A long sigh deflates my chest. “After Ty died, Jami’s dreams for this place quickly started dying too. But I think he ultimately left because he got his heart broken by a lot of things, Ty, Dad, Benson’s rebellious ways, but mostly a girl.”

Sadness fills Hope’s eyes. “A girl? That’s so sad. What happened?”

I take her hand in mine. “That’s Jami’s story to tell, not mine. But I wouldn’t be able to tell it if I tried. That boy keeps more locked inside than I do.”

“That’s a scary thought,” she mutters dryly, earning a jab to her side.

“You think that’s bad? Benson is even worse.”

She laughs. “And Cayson?”

I smile thinking of my sweet, innocent baby brother. “Cayson is perfect. Somehow, he managed to escape the darkness, unlike the rest of us, but I

think it's because we all protected him the most. I'm just glad one of us survived." I squeeze her hand. "Speaking of, I don't know how I would have handled seeing my brother tonight if you weren't here."

She squeezes my hand back. "Luckily, you'll never have to find out. That's a good sign that Jamison is back, right?" Her eyes dart between mine like she's not sure what to say. "Are you happy?"

I've always been the type of person who feels my emotions so deeply that I can't escape them, even if I never show what I'm truly feeling. My mask is my frown, and my anger is my sword. But I don't need armor and a weapon with Hope. "Yes," I admit. "But at the same time, I can't help but think there's more to why my brother is here. He swore he would never come back. There was too much pain."

"Because of Ty or the girl?"

"Both. Definitely both." I bite down on my lip, remembering my darkest days of loneliness after Jamison left. I had Silver, and my parents were still here, but that was the day I truly felt like I'd lost my soul. I clear my throat, dragging myself out of my painful memories. "Maybe I'll get to the bottom of it tomorrow." I nod, still processing my own convictions. "Either way, it's good to have him home."

Hope scoots closer and leans in to kiss my cheek. "Is there anything I can do?"

I turn my head, catching her lips with mine. "Help me forget." I squeeze my eyes shut and bow my head to hers. "I finally have you, and I want to enjoy our time."

She sets our glasses of ice water on the coffee table behind us then moves onto my lap, straddling me. She grips my face with her hands and stares directly into my eyes. "I want that too." Her sweet, plush lips kiss mine. "Let me take care of you tonight."

Everything about the scene is intoxicating. From the vanilla scent wafting from her skin to the sight of the orange flames from the fire lighting up around her. My mind is already spinning when she begins to unbutton my jeans. I watch as she pulls down my briefs and parts her lips at the sight of my thickening cock.

"Oh, my." She licks her already-glistening lips then moans while sliding my pants and briefs off completely. When she's discarded them behind her, she puts all of her focus on my thickening erection. One hand grips me at the base while her mouth parts in anticipation.

For the second time tonight, I can't breathe. I'm hypnotized by the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on salivating over me then lowering her mouth slowly onto my cock.

She adjusts her body so that her mouth is directly over me, and then she takes a swipe of me with her tongue. Then another. And another. Until she's swirling me into her mouth like a whirlpool gaining momentum.

"Holy shit, you're a goddess."

She is a goddess. A goddess, a queen, an angel wrapped up in one beautiful, tantalizing package.

She takes more of me in her mouth until there's no more swirling, there's just the back of her throat hitting my tip, firm lips suctioning to me, and then her beautiful mouth sliding up and down me like a woman possessed.

How the fuck did I go years seeing Hope at my camp every day without making a single move? I can't make sense of it, not when I'm on the verge of a pending eruption.

Right before I'm about to spill, I grip Hope's hair and groan. "Fuck, I'm going to come."

Unlike last time, Hope's lips curl up around me, and then she works me harder with her mouth while stroking me faster at the base. My release spurts into her mouth. I imagine it coating her throat, my essence hot and salty as she swallows every drop.

When she finally pulls out, I tug her toward me and slam my mouth on hers. "Your turn," I rasp.

Chapter Nineteen

HOPE

“**Y**ou don’t have to—”

“The fuck I don’t,” he growls. “I want to taste you again. Every part of you.” His lids flip open to find mine. “There isn’t a single dream of you from over the years that holds a candle to the real thing.”

I blink, intoxicated with more than the adrenaline that flows like a river through my system. “You dreamed about me?”

“Every damn day.”

My breath hitches, a clear signal to him to do as he pleases. Lord knows I’m finding it difficult to think about anything other than the way his greedy palm cups my breast before he yanks my bra down. His darkening gaze rockets me to such a new high that I almost miss his mouth wrapping around my rock-hard nipple. His other hand reaches the clasp of my bra and unclips it.

The next thing I know, I’m topless—and the star of Anderson Bexley’s attention. His mouth is on my breast, and that naughty tongue of his is circling and teasing while my core aches for him. He’s focused on his execution, paying equal attention to both breasts, which doesn’t surprise me. He’s an equal opportunity kind of guy, and I’m beginning to feel selfish because of all the work he’s putting in.

I lean over, grab the bottom hem of his shirt, and slide it over his head. “That’s better,” I say, trying to catch my breath as I drink him in. Muscles bulge and ripple beneath tan skin. The cut of him is hard and soft in all the right places. He’s not ripped like those guys at my gym who spend most of their time calculating their body-fat percentages and flexing in front of the mirror. He’s real—his body showcasing his strength from everyday activities rather than from weight machines and barbells. And it’s sexy as hell.

Anderson's expression darkens, making my heart skip at the complete contrast of how he reacts to me. One second he's confident as hell, stealing kisses, and making it clear just how much he wants me. And then he glares like that, showcasing his deepest desires.

I should care that we're both too dizzy to think straight. I should care that after this project is over, we don't know exactly what's going to happen. But he's Anderson. And tonight, I'm his.

My mouth is back on his, desperate for another taste. His lips mold to mine so naturally, I sink into him. I never want to leave this moment. Anderson is a passionate man, but I never expected him to kiss me like the world is falling apart around us and all we have left is each other. But that's exactly how it feels.

His mouth parts enough for me to see his tongue slide along the inside of his lip, back and forth, so slowly that I imagine he's concocting all the things he wants to do to me. Whatever will take his mind off all the things he can't control is okay by me.

He pushes me down so my back is pressed flat against the floor then climbs between my legs. He leans in and brushes his lips to mine before letting them travel down my chin, my neck, and between my breasts until he settles on one. The tip of his tongue makes wide circles around my areola, sending tingling sensations all over my body.

I hear the swish of water and ice cubes hitting the glass, but I don't even realize Anderson's other hand is busy doing sneaky things until an ice-cold sensation slides against my other nipple. A gasp bursts from my chest, and I look down to find a large cube teasing my other nipple. Anderson's focus is steady on me, a wicked gleam in his golden gaze as he continues his tease to both sensitive peaks.

A moan shakes through me, and I roll my head back to give into the intense pleasure. My entire body is alight with sensations that are completely in Anderson's control. Then the ice cube moves slowly up over my breast and across my collarbone until it's resting between my lips.

"Suck," he demands, his rasp so fucking hot I swear I can feel it vibrate through my center.

I do as he says, eager to find out what comes next, but I think that's part of his game. Anderson isn't in any rush to end his torture. In fact, I think he wants to prolong it. When the ice finally begins to move again, I adjust my focus to watch it.

The lower the cube slides, the faster my breathing becomes. Once it hits my belly, the ache between my thighs is too intense. A pool of water is melting there while he brings his mouth down where I need him the most, but he makes no move to tend to me.

“Anderson,” I breathe. “I don’t know if I can handle much more.”

His lips curl up slightly at the sides, confirming just how evil he plans to be. “Patience. We’re just getting to the good part.” He lowers the ice from my navel to my clit.

“Oh my God,” I moan. My hips jerk at the sensation, and Anderson’s hand is right there, looping around my bent leg to secure me to the floor as he continues his assault on the sensitive bundle of nerves.

He slides the ice down between my folds until it’s circling my entrance as his mouth moves onto my clit like a furnace in an ice storm. It goes from cold to hot, shocking my nerve endings and awakening an orgasm from deep inside me. I can feel it building slowly, matching Anderson’s torturous rhythm.

Two fingers slip inside me, and I know they will be my undoing. The ice is gone. It’s just Anderson and me now. He moves to my side while fucking me slowly with his fingers, then he takes my mouth with his. Our tongues tangle, our breaths quicken, and I know I’m seconds away from coming apart when Anderson slips his fingers out, buries his mouth in my neck, and growls. “Not yet.”

Pleasure slips away, but only for a second while Anderson adjusts us both. He hooks his arm around my knee and presses it into my side then places his cock at my entrance. He pushes inside, slowly at first. Our mouths collide, but no kiss comes. Not yet. We’re just breathing, anticipating each thick inch as he penetrates me deeper.

“I’ll never get enough of you, Hope.”

I squeeze my lids together as he roots himself as far as he can go. “It feels so good to hear you say that, because you’re it for me, Bexley.”

He kisses me now while he begins to fuck me, his thick cock sliding and deepening with every thrust. I’m already at the brink, my orgasm hitting me fast and hard while he gasps at how tightly my pussy clenches around him.

My release gives him permission to pick up the speed, because as soon as my last tremor smooths out, his thrusts become wilder, harder as he brings himself closer to climax.

I watch his handsome face, the control he always seems to carry fading

away and being replaced by an unbridled urgency. It's like he's unleashing all his demons in this one unchained fuck. He completely lets go, and it's the hottest thing I've ever seen in my life.

When he loses himself in his final thrusts, his release is like a fireworks show setting off inside me. I'll never forget this moment—a moment filled with what feels like a load of pent-up feelings finally being explored. We're flying high, sizzling through the air in brilliant colors, making the darkest of nights come alive for the world to see.

As he eases out from inside me and the fireplace light dims while we curl up together to sleep, I can't help but think about all the dark clouds that seem to be lingering from the last storm that tried to wreak havoc on us. I look over at Anderson, who is already asleep, his deep breaths a lullaby to my unsettling thoughts, and I pray the storm doesn't come for us again.

Chapter Twenty

ANDERSON

It's nine in the morning when I finally wake up. Hope is still fast asleep beside me, so I tiptoe around the room to get dressed in an effort not to wake her. I plant a light kiss on her head before sneaking out the front door and toward the north side of camp to find my brother.

The curtains to one of the cabins are cracked open, so I walk closer to peek through the window, only to find that Jami's night bag is sitting on the bed, but he's not inside. So I start my trek around camp in an effort to find him. He's not at the marina or any of the other lake outlets. He's not at the field or back at the front office. I look in all the places that would be new to him. The spa, the arcade, the pool, with my final stop being the saloon.

As soon as I see the inside lights on, I can't believe I didn't check here first. Back when this building was just a shack in the woods, it used to be Jami's favorite hideout. I can't even remember the number of times he and I would steal booze from our parents and sneak into the woods, only to find ourselves here, chuckling about some dumb-ass thing our little brothers had done that day. And if I wasn't with him, then it was his grade-school friend Violet. I always wondered if more was going on between them, but he always insisted that they were just friends.

I push open the door to find Jami sitting at the far end of the bar, his gaze transfixed out the window. There's nothing but woods in that direction, but something tells me it holds meaning for him.

"Not sure why this was the last place I looked."

Jami swivels slightly in his chair, appearing surprised by my entrance. He lets out a single laugh. "Ain't that always how it goes?" He tips his chin up. "You've done a hell of a lot with this place, brother. I'm proud of you."

My chest tightens at his words that hold more meaning than he can ever

realize. Unfortunately, those same words don't heal the wounds his absence created, but I'm willing to try to move past it. "Thanks, Jami."

"I mean," he starts, while letting his gaze travel, "this isn't exactly how I imagined it." He shrugs. "But it works."

What the fuck? "Maybe if you had been around, it would have been closer to what you had pictured," I snap. "I did my best, okay? I did my fucking best after you all abandoned me to go live your own lives like this place never even existed."

He slams his eyes closed and shakes his head. "Jesus, Andy. I wasn't trying to insult you. I know I haven't been around." He gives a wave of his hand. "This is all yours now. Do with it what you want."

The nonchalance in his tone stirs the anger inside me. "Unfortunately, this camp is not *all mine*. It's ours, whether you still want it or not. I'm just... trying to keep the dream alive, I guess."

Silence stretches between us, and I don't know if I should walk away or stay until I get to the bottom of why Jami is really here, because he wouldn't have any work to conduct on this island, and he sure as hell wouldn't pop on by to check on me. Something else is up. If he's not going to come right out and tell me, then I'll figure it out another way. "Have you heard from Benson?"

Jami shakes his head, his eyes glazing over. "No. I used to get my updates from Mom, but she hasn't heard from him in years. I can't even track him down online."

Maybe it's having Hope by my side, but while I know Benson is the wild child of the bunch, I've never worried about him in that way. "He's gonna be okay, Jami. He has to be."

Jami's jaw ticks. "That's what I keep trying to tell myself." He shrugs. "I don't know. Maybe I should hire a private investigator or something."

Something kicks in my chest. "You that worried?"

He shrugs. "I'm always worried."

I frown. "Could have fooled me."

Jami rolls his eyes and says nothing.

"How long are you staying?"

"I don't know." He looks at me. "I don't have to be back in Seattle until next week. Maybe I'll stick around here, if that's okay."

"Of course that's okay. It's your home too."

He nods. "Kinda figured you'd say that. Thanks, brother." He opens his

mouth to speak then slams it shut again. A second later, he's opening it again. His nostrils flare before he averts his gaze. "You ever get the feeling our family is cursed? The way we fell apart. The way we lost... everything."

"That's where you're wrong. We lost Ty. And it was the worst fucking tragedy any of us could have ever imagined. But it was our choices after he left this world that tore us apart. No one had to walk away."

There's so much pressure building behind my eyes, but I'm doing my damndest not to shed a tear. Jami doesn't understand that kind of emotion. He was always the toughest brother, keeping his feelings on lockdown so that no one could read his moods, calling any of us a pansy if we expressed any type of feelings, one way or the other.

"Maybe you're right," he says. "But you were there. We all tried."

I shake my head, letting out a frustrated laugh. "We put up a charade to make it look like we were okay. None of us were okay. Not even close. None of us dealt with Ty's death. At least not in the way we should have. We bottled it up for far too long, and it exploded in our faces."

Jami's entire expression hardens, and I know he won't even consider my words. He never does. In Jami's mind, the damage is done, and nothing is left to salvage. Then again, there must be some nugget of love for this family still in him, because he's here. He didn't have to come.

I chew on my own thoughts for a few minutes while Jami lifts himself off the stool and leans over the bar. He snags a bottle of Jack and two tumblers then sets them on the table.

"I don't want to talk about the past." He meets my gaze while exhaling a deep breath. "Let's drink."

I nod, ignoring the clock on the wall telling me it's definitely still morning. But I guess time doesn't matter when you've lost too much of it to begin with.

"So, tell me about your girl. Hope." His lips pop on her name. "We could all use a little Hope right now, couldn't we?" He nudges me and winks.

I stiffen and glare in return. "You're going to have to find your own. This one's all mine."

Jami chuckles. "Until she realizes just how small this place is and decides to get the hell out of dodge like the rest of us."

Anger sparks in my chest at a joke he probably doesn't even realize was a deep jab into an open wound. Before I can snap back with something clever, he's already at it again.

“You in love with her?”

A few beats pass, but not because I need to think of my answer. Giving my brother some delayed gratification feels nice right about now. “Yeah. I haven’t told her yet, but she knows.”

“You should tell her,” Jami says almost sourly. “Don’t wait. Time’s too precious for that. Maybe then you’ll have a chance of her stickin’ around.”

I look at my brother, who’s already halfway done with his tumbler. His attitude seems to be coming from someplace dark, but I know him well enough to know he won’t bleed a word of that darkness. He keeps it buried, locked up, and airtight, so his skeletons can never escape.

His words still swirl around that wound like a whirlpool threatening to drown every ounce of happiness I’ve felt in the past week since Hope has been back. Because my family is proof that it doesn’t matter how much you love something or someone. There are no guarantees that they’ll stick around for the long haul.

He looks at me again, studying me. “So, tell me how you two got together.”

Shoving my doubts back down into my chest, I hold up my glass and push out a half smile. “She started working here four years ago and became my activities director.” I lower my glass and swirl the liquid some. “From the moment I met her, I just wanted to be around her. I’d find any excuse to be with her, yet I was too scared and stupid to let her know. Instead, I pushed her away, and she left last year.” I shake my head. “A week ago, she showed up again.”

“Couldn’t get enough of you, eh, Andy?”

I tilt my lips up. “Not exactly. She’s the assigned project manager of the company that’s overseeing the grand reopening.”

“You’re fucking with me.” Jami’s mouth is hanging open. “How the hell did that happen?”

I chuckle and take a sip of my drink, letting the whiskey burn long and hard before I attempt another word. “Silver. Set up the whole thing without Hope or me knowing a damn thing. I guess it was her way of playing matchmaker.”

Jami tosses his head back and laughs. “Typical Silver. Always trying to fix everyone.”

“She was a blessing coming to our family the way she did.”

Jami nods, and I can tell how wholehearted it is. “It’s nice having her so

close now. We've met up for lunch a few times, and I've been able to catch up on her wild life."

Jealousy chews away at my heart. While Jami gets to have casual lunches with our sister, I'm sitting in our old spot at the cafeteria alone. I try to brush it off, knowing none of my negative thoughts will get me anywhere. "Anyway, I think you know Hope's boss."

"Who's that?"

"Dexter Van Clark."

Jami nearly spits out his drink. "Urgency's owner and COO? *That* Dexter Van Clark?"

I nod, deciding very carefully what I want to tell Jami next. "That's the one."

"He's been wining and dining me for years, trying to get our business. Small world, I guess."

"Very small. Well, if it's worth anything, the guy's the most disrespectful prick I've ever met. Hope thinks he only took me on as a client to get to you."

Jami's face twists with concern. "Sounds about right. The dude is on a power trip, if I ever saw one. Greedy little fuck, but my clients and I see right through him."

His words only affirm what I already knew. It takes everything to taper my anger while Jami continues.

"We let him schmooze us because he's a potential client of ours, but don't worry, he'll never get close to my clients."

It feels like a weight is being lifted off my shoulders. If anything, Jami's promise just means one less tie to Dexter when Hope is finally free from his clutches. I decide not to give Jami any more details and slide my tumbler over to him for a refill.

"What about you? Are you seeing anyone?"

He pauses for a second before shaking his head. "Nah. Nothing worth holding on to anyway."

I examine the sullen look on his face and reel back slightly. "That surprises me. You're thirty-one. I thought for sure you'd be married with three kids by now."

He chuckles. "Me? What about you, old man?" He lifts his brows, a twinkle in his eyes. "Thirty-six, huh? Better get your walking stick ready."

I knock my arm into his chest, making him reel back slightly.

"Ouch. I didn't realize you were so sensitive about your age."

“At least I have a woman. What are you going to do? Stay single forever?”

Jami’s playful demeanor dies almost instantly. “Sometimes I think I might.”

“What?” I balk. “You’re telling me Jami ‘the Casanova’ Bexley wants to grow up old and alone?”

He winces. “I’m saying... dating in Seattle is different. I don’t know. Once upon a time, everything felt so much easier here.”

A laugh bursts from my chest. “Like when?” I’m baffled by his suggestion that we’ve ever had it easy here. We grew up on a small island. Our pickings weren’t exactly plentiful back in the day.

“Like always. We were the kings of this place. Remember?”

I almost forgot how cocky Jami could be. I sigh while forcing myself to conjure up some memories that echo what he’s saying. “Maybe we were the *kings*, but I sure as hell didn’t date the way you did.”

Jami rolls his eyes. “Yeah, because you were never looking. You were always so focused on pleasing Dad and obsessing over this camp.”

“You have that all wrong, Jami. Yeah, I was obsessed, but I thought we were all obsessed. I felt like it was my duty as the oldest to learn from Dad so that this place could be ours when he finally retired. The last thing I ever imagined was you three bouncing the moment things got rough.”

Jami rolls his head back and sighs. “I swear, you had some kind of blinders on when it came to this place and Dad. We were all in hell, Andy. And if Dad hadn’t turned into a worse prick than he was before Ty died, then maybe—just maybe—it would have been bearable. I stuck around long enough to know that nothing was changing. So I left. You should have done the same.”

I throw up my hands. “And what would have happened to this place? Our *home*.”

Jami shrugs. “Let it rot, for all I care.”

“You don’t mean that.”

Jami’s next laugh is almost sinister, like he really doesn’t care. Like everything I’ve been working toward has been a complete fucking waste of my life.

“Look,” Jami says, “what you’ve done with this place is incredible, brother. I mean that. But it’s not my home anymore.” He meets my gaze with what feels like a final nail in my coffin. “And it never will be again.”

Chapter Twenty-One

HOPE

It's lunchtime when I decide to leave the office and search for Anderson. His phone is off, and I saw his brother roaming around outside the office window earlier, so I assume Anderson's making his way around camp per usual. But when I check all the obvious places only to come up empty, I head back to where I last saw him.

I reach the paved driveway of the three-story blue house that overlooks the water and smile as a wave of nostalgia hits. This is the first time since being back that I've taken a good look at the house during the day. It's tucked away from the main areas of camp so that stepping into the private residence feels almost intimate.

Back when Silver worked here, she would drag me to the blue house for hangouts with Anderson. I would always get giddy knowing that Anderson was just beyond the front doors. I looked forward to every surprising moment our eyes would meet then linger just enough to unleash the butterflies under my ribcage. Or the accidental touches when he would brush by me to make Silver and I another drink. And his laugh... Anderson rarely smiled and laughed at work, but during our secret hangouts, a different side of him came out. A playful side, a softer side. A side I quickly fell in love with.

Anderson's boots sit outside the door, telling me I'm on the right track. So I push open the unlocked door and make my way upstairs to the master bedroom where we slept last night. He's right there, curled up into his pillow asleep, with his mouth slightly parted. I scoot closer and wrap my arm around him from behind, soaking up his warmth like he's my personal furnace.

My heart squeezes, wondering if the talk with Jami didn't go so well. Anderson never naps during the day. Wanting to comfort him, I slip between the sheets.

“Hmm,” he mumbles when he feels me move in beside him.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Too late.” His words are garbled and grumpy, alerting me that something is definitely wrong.

I pause, delicately choosing my next words. “How’d everything go with Jamison this morning?”

A long silence follows, and I start to think he fell back asleep. “Terrible,” he says gruffly.

That’s all he gives me, not a single syllable more. “How long were you with him?” I try not to pry even though I want to know everything. While the history isn’t great, Anderson’s brother is here, and that’s a big deal.

“Not that long.” He stirs onto his back, his eyes still closed. “He was at the saloon. We had a drink. And then I left and had more.”

I frown, puzzled by his words. “This isn’t like you. Are you okay?”

Anderson lets out a heavy breath. “Yes. No. I don’t fucking know, Hope.” His eyes open and glare at me, but what I see in them isn’t anger. It’s deep pain, frustration, and loneliness. “I spent all morning trying to remember what the point of this damn reopening is. Who am I doing this for and why? Why did I stay?”

My heart feels like it’s breaking, and I don’t even know why. “Because you saw what they couldn’t, Anderson. That no matter what happened, this is still your home, and your dreams can still exist. You were just waiting for them to see it too. And they will.”

He smacks his palms into his face and drags them down to his chest. “It hit me this morning that that’s never going to happen. I’ve been holding on to childhood fantasies that lost their wings far before they ever had a chance to fly. No one wants this. I don’t even know if I want this anymore.”

My chest squeezes, and I sit up to assess Anderson’s demeanor. He’s a different man. A broken man. And I’m terrified that he’s the same man I left last year.

“Look. I don’t know what happened between you and Jamison, and I’m sure it’s a complicated subject, but you can’t say things like that. You might actually start to believe them.”

“Why shouldn’t I believe them? Maybe it’s me who’s been too fucking dumb to see what everyone else has been trying to show me. Our dream is dead. I’m sorry. I can’t have this conversation right now.” He sits up and walks toward the bathroom. “I need a shower.”

The door to the bathroom closes behind him, and a tear slides down my cheek. I can feel his pain, but I don't know how to fix it. I don't know if I *can* fix it. Catching a glimpse of the time on the bedside table, I swipe a hand across my face to dry my tears and stand from the bed.

Lunch time is over.

I leave Anderson to deal with the emotions that seem to be assaulting him all at once. I can handle his mood swings. They come from a dark place that he seems to constantly be dealing with. What I won't do is sit there and wait for him while he uses me as a punching bag. I've been that woman before—but never again.

I'm passing through the staff room, noting just how strange it's been to enter the office today—with the lights dim and the coffee unmade. I never thought to make it myself because I'd been expecting Anderson to walk in at any moment.

Sighing, I stop to make a pot of coffee and think about Anderson. Part of me wants to run back to the house and demand he talk to me, to help me understand his sudden change of heart. Anderson is Camp Bexley. He's bled for this place in more ways than one. And he's helped others fall in love with it here too. The fact that he's even remotely serious about giving it all up makes me sick, but I also know it must be coming from a very vulnerable place that I could never understand.

Once a fresh pot of coffee is set to brew, I make my way to the office, flipping on the lights as I go. When I get to the far end of the hall and see the office door beside Anderson's propped open and the lights already on, I pause to peek inside. Jamison Bexley sits there, his eyes focused on the screen in front of him.

He looks up and lifts his chin in greeting, as though the fact that he's taken up residence in someone's office after being away from camp for years is no big deal. "Afternoon, Hope." He searches the space behind me. "Andy with you?"

Andy? It takes me a second to realize he's talking about Anderson. Geez. I've never heard anyone call him that in all the years I've known him. "Um, no. He's still at the house, I think." I hold my next words back for as long as I can before I finally ask, "I'm sorry, but what are you doing in here? Does Anderson know you're here?"

Jamison leans back in his chair and laughs. "This is my camp too. I'm just looking over some of the books. Used to be my job around here." He

shrugs. “After taking a look around like you suggested, I was curious to see how it’s all flushing out.”

I narrow my eyes, my chest heating in Anderson’s defense. “If you need to know, the only thing not flushing out is the fact that you and your brothers treat Anderson like shit when all he’s ever wanted to do is make sure you all had everything you ever dreamed of.”

Jamison’s entire face flinches. “We treat him like shit, do we? Are you referring to Benson, who lost his twin in these woods? Or Cayson, who’s currently flying rescue supplies back and forth to Puerto Rico? Or maybe you’re referring to me.” Jamison stands, his tall, lean frame filling his white button-down dress shirt and black slacks in a way that reminds me of Dexter. Powerful, always on alert, and a force to be reckoned with. “Because if you are,” he continues, “I’ll have you know I want nothing for my brother but the best. But what he wants and what I want are two entirely different things.”

My heart thuds in my chest as I realize how far I overstepped. “I’m sorry.” I bat my eyes down, feeling my cheeks flame with embarrassment. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Jamison steps around the desk and leans against it while studying me. “You don’t owe me any apologies. You clearly care about my brother, and for that, I’m grateful. Maybe with you in his life he’ll stop holding on to this dream we all had when we were kids. It’s time for him to make new dreams. Maybe he can make them with you.”

I suck in a slow breath, an entirely new opinion of Jamison blooming in my mind. “I just want him to be happy, and his happiness would come much easier if he had his brothers back in his life.”

Jamison nods. “I hear you. I think we can all do better on that front.”

Just like that, the tension that quickly formed between us diminishes into understanding smiles.

“Hope?” Anderson’s voice comes from behind me.

I swivel around to find him walking in my direction. He’s about to say something more when he looks over my shoulder and sees Jamison leaning against the desk. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

Jamison stands again and makes his way back around the desk. “Figured I’d be useful while I’m here.”

Anderson’s jaw is tight when he nods. “All right.” He looks at me, his expression softening. “Hey, can we talk?”

I nod and give a parting smile to Jamison. “See you around.”

“Nice talking with you, Hope.”

Anderson lets me walk out the door first before darting a curious glance at his brother. When we’re inside his office, he closes the door and wraps his arms around me. “I’m so fucking sorry. You didn’t deserve that side of me. Please don’t be mad.”

Every ounce of sadness I felt this morning melts into a puddle at my feet. “I’m not mad at you. But I would like to understand where that came from. Did Jamison say something?”

Anderson touches his forehead to mine. “Let’s just say that Jamison being here brought up a lot of old feelings. I’m just confused right now, and I’m also pissed at myself for being so fucking stupid.”

I hold my palms to either side of his face and pull back enough so that he’s looking in my eyes. “Anderson Bexley, you need to stop letting what your brothers do determine your happiness because this is your life too. Stop trying to build their dreams. Even if they were here, they’d still have to do that on their own. Why don’t you admit to yourself that this is *your* dream. Screw them. Screw what they want or what they don’t want. What do *you* want?”

My heart is beating so fast, seemingly out of nowhere. I didn’t expect for all that to fly out of me, and I don’t even know where it came from. After all this time, I just hate seeing Anderson so broken over all the things he can’t control.

He squeezes his eyes shut then pries them back open while taking a deep pull of air. “I don’t deserve you. I’m sorry you’re here to see this entire shit show unfold.”

I sigh, my thoughts returning to my own problems. “It’s not like I don’t have my own shit show going on.”

He pulls back, his eyes wide. “But you still have a job, right?”

I shrug. “I guess so, but I’m not holding my breath. Dexter’s too quiet, which means he’s definitely up to something.”

Anderson frowns. “You think?”

The sound on the security cameras alerts us to another guest approaching the front gates. Anderson and I turn to each other. “Oh no,” he says as dread sinks into my gut. “Don’t tell me that asshole is back.”

We both turn to the monitors, only to find a different vehicle approaching. Another sports car. This one bright-red, shiny, and belonging to none other than Mallory fucking Shuman.

“Nope. Not him.”

This might just be worse than getting fired.

Chapter Twenty-Two

ANDERSON

Everything seems to happen in slow motion. Hope's eyes bulge, her face turns a terrifying shade of white, then her entire body begins to quake while the blood rushes back up to her neck and cheeks—until everything about her appears to be filled with rage.

“I take it you know that person.”

Hope takes in a slow breath while closing her eyes. “You can say that.” She releases her breath and looks back toward the camera, which shows a woman exiting her car. “That,” she starts through gritted teeth, “is Dexter's number one, Mallory Shuman. His senior project manager. And the one person I did not want anywhere near this project.”

“Well, then why the hell is she here?”

Hope gives me a look as though the answer is obvious. “I'll give you one guess.”

I reel back slightly. “To replace you?”

She shakes her head. “No. If I was fired, I would have heard about it by now. My computer would be locked up, and my phone would be without service. Dexter sent her here to punish me by taking away the only thing I've been asking for since I started working for him. And that's to have my own project, one where Mallory isn't breathing down my neck and reporting my every exaggerated mistake back to Dexter.”

Anger begins to filter its way through my system. “You're irreplaceable. It's you or no one. Don't worry. I'll talk to Dexter.”

She deflates so fast, her face crumbling, that I know I somehow said the wrong thing. “You can't do that. Please, Anderson. You're incredible for wanting to help, but this is my problem. It's me who's going to resolve it.”

“But I'm the client. Remove our personal relationship from the picture. I

should still get a say about who works on my reopening.”

She nods. “Maybe so, but we both know our personal relationship is the only reason you would fight to keep me around.”

“Wrong. It’s because you’re damn good at your job, and you know what this camp needs better than anyone. And frankly, you never should have left. I’m the reason you took that job in the first place, so let me do something to make this right.”

She tilts her head, her eyes softening even though I can still see the tension she’s carrying by the frown lines in her forehead. “You may have been the one who pushed me to go, but it was my choice to have a relationship with Dexter. These are the consequences of my actions.” She sighs and turns back to the monitor, where Mallory seems to look a little lost as she veers toward the main building we’re standing in now. “Promise me you’ll let me handle it.”

My jaw clenches. I don’t want to promise, but I know she’s giving me no choice. “Fine, but if you change your mind, just say the word.”

Her face relaxes, and she gives me a thankful smile. “I will. I’ll keep reminding myself that it’s temporary. Until I find something new.”

Hearing her confirm that she’s willing to leave Urgency is the comfort to my soul I need. I embrace her again, and this time I’m rewarded with a warm hug back. I kiss her head and lean back slightly. “I’ll go greet her while you pretend you never even saw her coming.”

Hope laughs. “Now that sounds like a deal. Maybe you can give her one of those big, long tours like you gave Dexter.”

My grin stretches wide. “This will be fun, seeing as her heels are about an inch taller than the ones you were wearing on that first day. And don’t worry. If her plan is to stay, I’ll stick her in one of the kiddie cabins on the west side of camp.” I wink.

Hope leans in, kissing me hard on the lips. “My hero.”

The front doorbell chimes, and I head toward reception, pasting a smile on my face to greet the woman. “Hello. Welcome to Camp Bexley. What can I do for you?” I decide to give the woman zero indication that I was briefed on her arrival.

Her smile comes easily, a little too easily, as she sweeps a long strand of silky red hair over her shoulder before extending her hand to me. “My name is Mallory Shuman, a co-worker of Hope’s, and a senior project manager at Urgency. It’s so nice to finally meet you. I’ve heard wonderful things about

you and this camp.” She sweeps her gaze around like it’s the most fabulous office she’s ever had the pleasure of standing in.

Stifling a laugh, I take her hand and shake it before releasing it just as quickly. “Nice to meet you. So, what brings you here?”

She claps her hands together, opening her eyes wide. “I had to stop by to meet you and say hello to Hope. I’ve been a mentor of Hope’s with her projects back home, so I wanted to make sure everything was going smoothly for you and your reopening.”

The way she assesses me like she’s waiting for me to tell her some juicy gossip makes me ill. “I couldn’t be happier. In fact, Dexter stopped by the other day, and I told him the same thing. Hope is completely zoned in on what needs to be accomplished, and I’m just here for the ride.”

If I wasn’t watching Mallory specifically for her subtle reactions, I might have missed the annoying flicker in her eyes before her entire face lights up again. “I’m so happy to hear that.” She looks around, as if curious. “Where is our little rock star?”

“Oh,” I say, before nodding to the door behind her, “she’s probably taking her morning walk. Why don’t I take you on a little tour while we look for her?”

Mallory blinks, appearing caught off guard. “That sounds wonderful.”

I clap my hands together. “Great. Right this way.”



* * *

“I guess she must be in the office by now,” I say.

Four hours later, after several breaks so that Mallory could sit to tap out frantic messages on her cell phone and one tortuous lunch alone with the overly flirtatious woman, we're finally heading back toward reception. I know far too much about her six years at Urgency, all the high-profile clients she’s had the pleasure of working with, and how eager she is to be of

assistance with Camp Bexley's reopening. Even after I was insistent on the fact that we're in good hands, she didn't seem to hear it.

I lead Mallory back into the main building through the staff entrance and down the hall to my office. Hope is there, her eyes laser focused on the screen while she types like mad. I almost hate to disturb her, but any more delays and I think Mallory will bust a blood vessel in an eye.

Hope looks up at the sound of our approach. She adopts a shocked expression that just might be believable. "Mallory, what a surprise."

Mallory's laugh comes out a bit forced as she steps into the room. "I wanted to stop by and check on you. See how you're doing. See if you need anything."

Hope's tight smile spreads wide. "Everything is going great here. You should have called."

There it is. The crack in the armor, and the tension is already billowing out.

Mallory presses the tips of her fingers to her chest and gasps with what seems like exaggerated offense. "And miss the opportunity to see Camp Bexley for myself? No way. Anderson just got done giving me a tour, and I already have so many ideas I'd like to run by you both." She looks between us like she's bursting at the seams with all that she wants to contribute.

Hope's smile falls. "That's wonderful, Mallory. Unfortunately, our budget leaves little wiggle room for wish-list items, but if you'd like to send me an email with your ideas, I can find some time to run them by Anderson once our work here is complete."

Mallory's lids narrow slightly before she widens them again and beams back at Hope. "Nonsense. There's always room to enhance the quality of our offerings."

Hope sharpens her eyes. "I assure you, our client is very pleased with the offerings he's been provided."

This time, Mallory's eyes lift in surprise. "Is that so?"

Both women turn to me, and I know this means I have to pick a side. Of course, I'm with Hope, but how do I let Mallory know that without digging Hope a bigger hole than she's already finding herself in because of me? Part of me wants to stay and agree with everything Hope is saying, and the other part of me wants to lead Mallory straight back to her car where she can drive off into the sunset.

What kind of environment is there at Urgency after all? And why the hell

am I giving them my business if Dexter pits his employees against each other like they're competitors instead of members of a team? Only an arrogant prick would do something so evil.

"I am very pleased with all the offerings," I say, hoping to dissolve the matter with a few words. "However, since you came all this way, I would love to hear your ideas and take them into consideration."

Mallory smiles as if she's won. "Wonderful."

I can feel Hope's harsh glare and cringe. I don't like how Mallory makes Hope feel. I sure as hell don't like the fact that Hope has had to deal with this condescending woman for the past year. And I hate that Hope still feels loyal to a company with people who have done nothing but belittle her in my presence. It's shameful, but I made Hope a promise that I wouldn't interfere, so I won't.

I watch Hope for the cues I need to make my decision about what to do. And right now, her level gaze is telling me to get the hell out of her office so she can talk to Mallory alone. So I nod begrudgingly and close the door behind me as I go.

"This is going to be interesting." Jami's voice startles me, causing me to freeze then walk toward him.

"You have no idea."

Jami chuckles. "Oh, I know a thing or two. Did you forget I'm familiar with Dexter's company?" He points to the wall, signaling to the room next door. "That woman is ferocious. You don't want her on your bad side."

My gut feels weighted with discomfort. I can't believe I left Hope alone with that woman. "I think it's too late for that. I'm sure Dexter sent her here to rattle Hope."

"That doesn't surprise me one bit."

I fold my arms and lean into the door frame, knowing that if I'm going to do as I promised and let Hope handle her career without my interference, then I need a distraction, a change of subject. "Any more thoughts about hiring a private eye to find Benny?"

Jami cringes. "Those thoughts never stop. I just want to know he's okay. Mom would appreciate some good news too. She loves their land in Bellingham, but she's mentioned several times how much she misses when we were all together. I know she's with Dad, but she's lonely, Andy."

My chest squeezes. I know the lonely feeling all too well, but if my brothers never return home, there's nothing I can do to fix what's been

broken. We'll all have to find a way to cope.

"You still haven't talked to Dad, huh?"

Jami shakes his head. "Nah. Just Mom. So much time has gone by. Sometimes I have trouble remembering what caused such a huge divide, and then other times, I remember the pain so deeply, it's like I'm right there back in the stables getting whipped by his crop like I was some fucking horse he needed to train."

An image of Jami at nineteen, with a long, red welt slashed across his back makes my chest clench and my body ache. But there's no worse image than Jami's face after Dad took the crop to him. I'll never forget those sad, watery, hazel-green eyes staring back at me. It wasn't pain from the rope that made him cry that day—it was the permanent scar left on his heart.

I wince at the memory. "I wish I'd gotten there sooner. He was out of control."

Jami shakes his head. "It wasn't the first time, but I'm glad it was the last. He completely lost his fucking mind after Ty died. I tried to deal with it for as long as I could, Andy, but five years later, I hit my limit. Anyway, all that shit is in the past now."

I want to argue that clearly it's not. He's still thinking about it. And while he might have stuck around another five years after his last beating, his resentment for our father only grew darker and more intense. Even then, my father wasn't completely responsible for Jami leaving. Something awful happened on that final day—something that drove Jami to do what he'd always threatened to do and run off to the city where he could get lost in the lights. I don't know what. To this day, Jami refuses to tell me what happened.

"What are you still doing in here anyway?" I look around, gesturing to the office.

I'm tired. Too tired to be apologetic that I changed the subject. I'm exhausted from the tension that exists everywhere I turn. Tired of my brother's rejection and all the nuggets of hope I've held on to over the years. After my talk with Jami this morning, reality finally set in. This isn't about my brothers. This is about me. The dreams I thought we all still carried deep down are mine, and it's time I start accepting that.

Jami leans back in his chair and points to the screen. "I've been riveted by financials all day. I have to admit, brother, you've done a hell of a lot since Dad left. You've never once had a dry season. You've kept profit margins at a steady increase, and I can only imagine the boom you'll see once Hope's

impressive marketing plan takes effect.”

“You read her marketing plan?”

He nods. “Sure did.”

Emotion kicks in my chest, but I try to not get too excited. There’s a lot Jami has missed over the years. Discounts I’ve had to offer to keep operations moving. The inspections I nearly failed because my eyes couldn’t be in all places at once. The year when turnover was at an all-time high because I had to cut wages just to keep us all afloat.

“Thanks, Jami. That means a lot coming from you.”

“Of course,” he says with a twinkle in his eyes, “you could maybe grow a pair when it comes to your suggested price points for the resort. If you’re not careful, you’ll be completely booked and realize too late that you’re running yourself and your staff too thin. There’s an incentive there. You just have to take a little bit of a risk.”

I step forward and take a seat in front of him. Instinct makes me want to tell him just what I think about his unwelcome ideas. But after second thought, I realize Jami was always the one with the brilliant ideas on how to make this place more profitable, and I was always the one too afraid to execute big moves the way he can. Which is precisely why I need him.

“With all due respect, if you want nothing to do with this place, then why do you care? Because you can give me all your suggestions until you’re blue in the face, and they could be the most brilliant ideas that ever existed, but I’m the one who has to see them through, and we both know that’s not my strong suit.”

He shrugs. “So let me help.” He slides a document toward me. It’s an excel sheet with a breakdown of numbers that make my head hurt before I can even truly look at it. “You’re on the right track. But with some minor adjustments, the potential is huge.”

I stare at my brother, confused by the whiplash that he’s causing me. It would be a lie to say that I’m not resentful over the things he said to me in the saloon, but I’ve also learned a big lesson from Hope’s return, and that’s to not push away people you love. No matter the internal battle you may be fighting. Your loved ones are never your enemies.

“All right, Jami. I’m all ears if you’re willing to dole out the advice.”

He smiles, and I think it’s a genuine smile, one filled with a glimmer of love he once had for this place. Maybe there’s more buried beneath the surface than he’s willing to admit. And maybe, just maybe, his time here will

uncover more where that came from.

Chapter Twenty-Three

HOPE

The door clicks closed, almost as if it's the sound of my fate being sealed. I'm trapped. Locked inside a room with the one person who has the power to send me straight over the edge. I don't want to work at Urgency any longer. That much is clear to me by now. But I'm determined to salvage my pride and reputation before Dexter completely destroys any opportunity I have to find something better.

Mallory turns around, her fake smile sliding into something sinister. "I guess we can cut the shit now."

I push my shoulders back, forcing my expression to remain unfazed. "By all means. Don't hold back on my account."

"Dexter sent me to oversee things from here on out. You'll continue to be the face of the project. Our client has clearly taken a liking to you. But your progress is slow, your reports are lacking, and we both think that it's in the best interest of Urgency for you to report to me from now on."

Heat explodes in my chest, and even though I'd been preparing all day—hell, all weekend—for some type of blow, I honestly didn't expect this. Dexter could have fired me, and it wouldn't have crushed my pride as much as sending Mallory here to lead my project.

"That's ridiculous, and you know it. You aren't suited for a project like this, and you sure as hell have no chance to catch up with all the work I've already put in this. The artwork has already been approved. Social-media plans have already been created and scheduled out six months in advance. Advertising mailers are already rolling out. Invitations for the event are already set to go out. You're too late to take credit for my hard work this time."

The corner of her mouth tugs up another inch, making her look like more

of a snake than she already does. “And you think I give a shit?” she hisses. “I’m only here because Dexter finally knows what I’ve been warning him of since the day you walked through Urgency’s doors with nothing but inexperience and that bounce that made me so fucking dizzy.”

“What is it that Dexter finally realizes? That I’m capable of handling projects without you insulting me at every turn?” I reach for my phone. “I’m calling Dexter.”

Mallory laughs. “Go ahead.” She sits down in the chair across from me, a wide smile plastered to her face. “Make sure to put him on speaker.”

Ignoring her, I speed-dial Dexter, and he picks up on the first ring. “Miss Davies. Wonderful to hear from you. How are things today at Camp Bexley?”

There’s acid in his tone that I could pick up from a mile away, but I ignore that too. “I hear you’ve made an unnecessary change to my project and forgot to inform me.”

“Ah, yes. I didn’t want to bother you with all the details, so I asked Mallory to give the update. After my assessment of your work on Friday, I decided to make the change. I hope that won’t be a problem for you, Miss Davies. Or do you have a personal stake in the matter you’d like to confess?”

I bat my eyes at the phone as lightning strikes in my chest. “Not at all, sir.” My gaze meets Mallory’s smug smile. “Will you be the one to tell our client, or should Mallory do that? Seeing as I’m not the lead anymore, it’s probably not appropriate for me to communicate such project-altering news.”

There’s a moment of silence before Dexter speaks up. “I can make the call. Bexley will surely understand why I made the decision to bring on our senior account manager to such an important job. After all, his success is of our utmost concern.”

As much as I don’t want Anderson getting involved with the mess I’ve created, he is the client, and Dexter owes him the courtesy of a phone call if he’s going to make a decision like this. The only difference is that no other client would challenge Dexter the way Anderson will.

“Thank you for your time, Mr. Van Clark. I look forward to hearing back from you after your call with Mr. Bexley.”

More silence. It’s like Dexter knows I know something he doesn’t, which I guess I do. Anderson will never allow Dexter to replace me. He’s in for a rude awakening. I hang up and settle back into my chair with a smile directed at Mallory. “Well, there you go. Mr. Van Clark will deliver the news to our

client. Until then”—I scoot forward in my chair and point to the door—“you can get the hell out of my office.”

Mallory’s lids narrow, and her cheeks brighten to a shade of red that pleases me more than I should admit. I’ve never had the chance to talk to Mallory this way in the Seattle office, but a new confidence is washing over me now. No one is going to take away my job, especially not her.

“Dear, naive soul.” Mallory’s tone drips of venom. “If you think you have a chance in hell of winning against me, you are wrong.”

“No, Mallory. It’s you who’s wrong. You’ve roadblocked me all damn year, but that’s not happening again. Anderson Bexley is quite happy with the work I’ve put in. Without me, there is no project. I’m sure that’s exactly what he’ll tell Dexter.”

One corner of Mallory’s mouth tips up in a smirk. “Dexter was thinking with his dick when he hired you, Davies. He let me know as much before asking me to toughen you up. Challenge you. Mold you into a carbon copy of me, basically. Except”—she scoots onto the edge of her chair—“I would never fuck the boss.” She lets her narrowly slitted eyes drag over me. “Unlike you.”

I swallow. “Excuse me?”

Her eyes sparkle with amusement. “Don’t play coy with me. I’ve known the entire time, but I promised Dexter I would keep quiet. We made a deal.” She slides her palms down her suit dress, appearing nonchalant while she continues. “Why do you think your experience at Urgency has gone no further than the day you walked in? Your role is equivalent to that of an assistant with a much fancier title.”

“You’re lying.” I can feel my body start to shake with anger. “He would have told me.”

Mallory’s chuckle is as evil as her menacing tone. “He enjoyed fucking you too much. He knew you’d end it if anyone in the office found out. So I used it to my advantage.”

My mouth drops open while I try to wrap my head around what she’s telling me. While what she’s saying makes sense, there are pieces that don’t add up. “Dexter promised me a raise and a promotion once this job was complete. Why would he do that if what you say is true?”

She quirks a brow. “Simple. He thought if the secret was out that you were a couple that my leverage over you would dissolve. But you turned him down, which means I still own your ass.” She narrows her eyes. “He gave

you a chance, and you blew it.” She looks around with a distasteful eye. “Trust me, I’d rather rot in hell than walk another inch of this campground, but it’s all worth it to watch you drown.”

The fire in my chest spreads to every limb. “None of that matters. If you think for one second Anderson is going to allow for you to replace me, then you’re sadly mistaken.”

Mallory shrugs. “Bexley isn’t the one who signs your paychecks, now is he?” She stands and leans over my desk. “But don’t worry.” She narrows her gaze. “I’m sure you’ll crawl back to Dexter and suck his dick to make it all better, won’t you? Maybe then you’ll even get to keep your job.”

“Fuck you,” I hiss.

She grins. “Might as well go pack your things now. I’ll be the one bringing this project home for Bexley.” She peers down at her blouse and plucks a button to reveal a healthy amount of cleavage. “He’s sexy too. It shouldn’t be difficult to seduce him into forgetting you ever existed.”

I’m seeing red. Every bone in my body is shaking while my heart tremors in my chest. I don’t even know what all of this means or why I care as much as I do. It’s not like I have my heart set on staying at Urgency. I’ve already decided I’ll find something new. Something better. Maybe it’s my ego. Maybe it’s my pride. But I refuse to let Mallory win.

I slam my laptop shut, throw my things in my shoulder bag, and storm out of the office before Mallory can utter another word. I find Anderson in his woodworking shop deep in the woods. The sound of a high-pitched saw gives him away. He’s sanding one of the canoes like he used to do when he was looking for a distraction. I sure could use one of those now.

“Has Dexter called you yet?” I yell over the sound of the saw.

Anderson’s head snaps up, his forehead wrinkling with concern. He turns off the drill saw and sets it on the table. He shakes his head but plucks his phone from his back pocket and wrinkles his forehead. “I guess he did. What’s going on?”

I suck in a sharp breath, blinking back the rage still storming through me. “Mallory’s your new project lead. Congratulations. Oh, and she plans to seduce you to earn your praise.”

“The fuck she—”

“She hates me, Anderson. She’s had it out for me from the beginning. She admitted as much to me just now. Even worse, she also told me that she knows about Dexter and me. She’s known the whole time, and she’s been

using it against me to hold me back. That's why I was always fighting against the tide. No matter how hard I worked, I had no chance in hell of getting what I deserved."

Anderson balls his hands into fists. Even he can't comprehend Mallory's behavior. "Then fucking quit, Hope. You don't need that place."

"No," I say, fully aware of how stubborn I come across. "That would mean that Mallory and Dexter win. This is my project. I've earned this. No one is taking it away from me. When I get back to the office on Monday, I'll start looking for another job. At least that way I can quit on my own terms."

"You don't need to look for another job. Work here. You know that's an option, right?"

I sigh and shake my head. "No offense, but I don't want to be your activities director anymore. If there's anything leaving here taught me, it's that I'm made for project management."

Anderson's frown is deep, showcasing his doubt, but he nods. "Okay, then tell me what to do next."

I inhale a deep breath and nod to his phone. "Call Dexter back."



* * *

ANDERSON

"Hey, Anderson. Just the man I wanted to talk to. Thanks for calling me back."

My eyes flicker to Hope's hypnotizing green ones, and I hope the effect is enough to keep my cool during the phone call. I have nothing nice to say to Dexter Van Clark. Not today, not ever. "Not a problem. What can I do for you?"

"It's what I can do for you, my man. I hear you've already met Mallory

Shuman, my senior account manager?”

“Ah, yes. That was quite the surprise.” I can’t even pretend to be pleasant during this phone call. “A heads-up would have been nice.”

Dexter chuckles. “Of course. Well, I can assure you that you are in good hands with Mallory there now. She’s been with Urgency for over six years. In fact, she’s the one that’s been training Hope all year. I know how much you’ve loved having Hope there.”

“Yes” —I say slowly—“Hope has been wonderful and more than enough to fit my needs.” My words come with a meaning that only Hope and I will understand, and it makes her lips curl up, despite being in the gloomiest of circumstances. “I’m not sure what you intend for Mallory to do for me, but her presence won’t be needed.”

There’s a cold pause for a beat before Dexter’s obnoxious chuckle kicks in. “I assure you that you’ll be more than happy with Mallory taking the lead on your account. Hope will still be there to assist—”

“Excuse me for cutting in, Dexter, but I think I’ve made it perfectly clear that I’m happy with the way this project is being run. There’s no need to invite anyone here without my consent, especially considering Hope is only to be on site for another four days. Mallory’s services will not be needed. If there’s a problem with that, then we can terminate our business relationship now.”

Hope’s eyes go wide, and she shakes her head. Maybe I was a little too firm. The last thing Hope needs is for her boss to find out that she ended their fling because of me.

“I certainly wouldn’t want to do that. I was only trying to bring in some seasoned blood to enhance the outcome of your success. When I took you on as a client, I saw a long-term future for us. After visiting, my thought was that Mallory was the better project manager for that bigger picture outcome.”

“And my thought is that you’re trying to fix something that isn’t broken. I’m happy with the project the way it is.” I frown at the window where the fading sunlight is darkening the woods at a fairly quick rate. “Mallory can stay the night if she’d like, but I’m afraid I can’t accommodate a second staff member of yours.”

Dexter clears his throat, my insistence clearly throwing him off. “Of course. I’ll talk to her now. Thank you for your time, Anderson.”

“One second, Dexter. Now that I have you, there is one project change you could make for me that I would greatly appreciate.”

“Of course. What’s that?”

“I’d love to extend Hope’s stay here another couple of weeks at least so that she can be here leading up until the event. I’ll continue paying for all her accommodations, and she’s free to tend to other client needs if required.”

Dexter clears his throat. “I’m afraid that would require a revision to the contract budget.”

“Fine,” I snap, my impatience for the man already at an all-time high. “Send it over. I’ll sign today.”

Another beat of silence passes then another. At this point, I’m certain Dexter is onto my relationship with Hope, but I don’t give a fuck at this point. If he’s truly a smart man, then he won’t say anything about it.

“I’m sure that can be arranged. Is Hope with you now? Would you like to tell her, or should I give her a quick buzz?”

I smile at Hope. “I’m sure I’ll see her around camp soon. I can let her know.”

“Wonderful,” Dexter says, his tone dryer than when we began.

“Thanks for the call, Dex.” I click the phone off just as Hope rushes to me and throws her arms around my neck.

“Thank you.” Her whisper is so soft and heartfelt that it makes my chest squeeze.

“You don’t need to thank me. I would do anything for you, and I admit, that felt pretty damn good.”

She laughs and touches her lips to mine. “That was kind of you to offer Mallory a place to stay tonight. Guess we need to be on our best behavior until she’s gone.”

I smile and shake my head. “Nope. It means we need to be worse. Looks like I’ll be sneaking into your cabin tonight.”

She presses her lips to mine before whispering across them, “I’ll make sure to keep my door unlocked.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

HOPE

The sound of the doorknob turning makes my heart race. It feels like I've been waiting for Anderson for hours. After a very uncomfortable dinner with Mallory, Anderson escorted her to her cabin for the night—clear on the other side of camp.

He must have wanted to give it a healthy amount of time before making good on his promise and heading over to my cabin. The thought of us sneaking around like this makes me giggle as he shuts the door before him.

“What are you laughing about?” he teases while stripping off his jacket.

“Just the fact that we're two grown adults tiptoeing around your camp like a couple of teenagers.”

He smiles and takes off his shoes next. “I think I'm the one sneaking around, not you. And I definitely didn't tiptoe here.”

I roll my eyes. “What'd you do? Run?”

Anderson pulls his shirt over his head. “It was more like a jog. I didn't want to jump into your bed all sweaty.”

“Smart move,” I purr, watching his pants drop to the floor until all that's standing there is a handsome man in black briefs that hug him in all the right places.

“What can I say? I'm a smart guy.” He grins and then slips beneath the covers. He hugs me to him, humming the moment he touches bare skin. “Are you naked?” I bite down on my lip and refrain from saying a word as he explores my body, answering his own question as he goes. “Well, fuck me.”

“That's definitely the plan.” I spread my legs right as his palm sinks lower. He doesn't waste a single second pushing a thick digit inside me.

“And here I was, thinking we were going to talk and cuddle all night.”

He adds another finger. “Lucky for you, I can multitask.”

My eyes slam shut as pleasure rockets through me. All it takes is his touch, and I feel it everywhere. My body feels more alive than ever before. The thrill of today certainly adds to my eagerness, I know that much. I reach for his length, which is already fully hard. My hand doesn't fit around it completely, but I do my best, gripping it firmly and stroking him until he groans.

"You're a very talented woman, Hope Davies." He pumps his fingers into me faster, hitting me deeper than before.

"You're quite the talent yourself," I echo, wanting nothing more than to live in this moment forever. It's like he was made for me, molded by my dreams themselves. And here we are, two tangled souls, hearts colliding, breaths synching. For the first time in a long time, it feels like all my dreams are coming true. Everything is going to be okay.

He presses his lips to my neck while he picks up the rhythm. I do the same with his cock in my grip.

"You feel so fucking good. So wet and tight. And it's all for me." He finds my mouth and kisses me deeply, while pleasuring my clit with a rub of his thumb.

"I feel like I'm going to explode."

"Do it. Come for me. You'll feel so good sliding on my cock next. I can't wait."

There's a hitch in my throat. My heart is racing as my first orgasm crashes through me in waves.

I'm still coming hard when he slips his fingers out of me, sits me up, and pulls my legs around his waist. With a quick alignment, he's spearing me with his dick and pulling me down around him so fast and hard that I scream out.

I'm somewhere between heaven and hell as every fiber of my being comes alive at the fullness, but he's relentless tonight. Jerking me onto his cock so fast that the motions are all controlled by him. My breasts bounce as he aims to take one into his mouth. When he finally latches on, he's hitting me so deep, I know it's only a matter of seconds before I'm a mess all over his lap.

His thick hair makes for great leverage as I grip him with both hands, holding on to them like reins in the wildest rodeo as he tears me apart from the inside out.

"I don't know what got into you tonight"—my voice bounces with every

move—“but I love it.”

“*You got into me,*” he growls. “You’ve been engrained in me since the day we met. This is my attempt to engrain myself in you. Mind, body, soul.”

His words are almost as sexy as the way he’s pounding me like a wild bull in the heat of the arena. Our skin slaps together as another scream breaks free from my throat. Sex has never felt like this for me before. Untamed, passionate—but it’s not just hot sex. It’s emotional and raw, something I was always missing from my hookups with Dexter.

Anderson is here with me in every way. He doesn’t make me an object, a possession. He’s never made me feel that way. He makes me feel cherished, loved, and desired in a way that only true love can.

He leans back and sucks harder on my nipple while I fight to hold on to my release a little bit longer. I can’t come twice. Not when he hasn’t even come once.

“It’s okay to let go, Hope.”

“What about you?” I gasp, the signs of my orgasm rising from deep inside me.

“Oh, I’m not too far behind you, but you don’t need to wait.” His thumb finds my clit again. One touch of my magic button and my release is completely out of my control. I’m convulsing around him as this one hits me even harder than the first until all my muscles go completely numb.

“Holy fuck, you’re beautiful. You should see your face when you come. I’ve never seen anything so sexy.”

My head falls into the crook of his neck as his pacing slows. Anderson has enough energy to last for days, but I can tell fatigue is beginning to set in. So I pull together all the remaining strength I have and take over.

I dig my knees into the bed beside him and ride him slowly, moving my hips while his stop completely. He leans back on his palms, his head dropped back slightly and his eyes hooded enough that he can still watch every roll of my hips as I slip and slide around him.

My hands move to his chest while he sinks his teeth into his bottom lip. He’s still holding back. It’s like he’s fighting off each potential orgasm, and it’s only going to add to the intensity. But he doesn’t last much longer. A growl rumbles from his chest as he rocks me with a few more thrusts. Then he’s spilling inside of me, filling me with his warmth.

I wrap my arms around his neck and bring him closer, my lips teasing his before they skim his jawline and find his ear. “You were made for me,

Bexley.”

He groans, then his palms lift from behind him, smack my ass, and squeeze before drawing himself out of me. He pulls me down onto the bed beside him and holds me close. “Made for Bexley.” The corners of his lips turn up in a smile. “Sounds like a postcard.”

“Or a T-shirt.”

He chuckles. “Sounds like my marketing guru should get started on that.”

I glare at him. “I think your marketing guru is quite busy at the moment.”

“Well, then that makes two of us,” he teases.

“Oh yeah? What’s he busy doing?”

He touches his nose to mine, unleashing a wild flock of butterflies from my chest. “Loving you.”

I suck in a breath, the only worthwhile answer on the tip of my tongue along with a bundle of emotions that are knotting my chest. “Well, then that makes two of us.” I repeat his words softly, fighting off a wave of tears.

He smiles, and it’s the most effortless smile I’ve ever seen him wear. “I guess that means we’re in love.”

I smile back, unable to contain years of pent-up feelings for a man I prayed to the moon for every night. “I guess so.”

It’s the best, most romantic, and most memorable night of my life, even after he gets dressed and makes me walk him to the door so he can sneak away into the night.

When his lips press against mine and he pushes my naked body into the door frame before lifting me and wrapping my legs around his waist to prolong our kiss, nothing can break us of our spell... not even the rustling of the leaves in the woods across from the cabin.

Chapter Twenty-Five

HOPE

My morning alarm goes off, and I blink at the ceiling. I don't think I slept a single minute all night. An unsettled feeling weighed on my chest after Anderson left. A weight I could only tie to the fact that even if I had won a small battle yesterday, the war will continue when I return to Seattle.

After I shower, get dressed, and sneak out to head to the office, I jerk to a stop the moment I see Dexter leaning against the main staff building. *What the hell?* He must have taken the first ferry out.

“Good morning, Miss Davies. I take it you slept quite well last night?”

I narrow my eyes and stop walking altogether. “I don't think that's any of your business.”

“It is if you're fucking the client,” he says with a smile. “That is very much my business.”

He knows. A sickening feeling sinks in my gut while I search the surrounding space for Mallory.

“She's already back at the office,” Dexter says, reading my mind. “Her visit here served its purpose.”

“You asked her to spy on me?”

He glares. “I knew you were a fucking liar.”

“I didn't want to hurt you.”

“Bullshit.”

I suck in a breath. There is nothing I'll be able to say to him to make him understand that I never planned any of this. So I shrug, my conviction almost as strong as my defeat. “Then what's next, Dexter? Are you going to fire me?”

“Is that what you want? You want me to fire you so you can move back to this”—he makes a grand sweeping gaze of his surroundings—“shit hole?”

And what, make minimum wage when I pay you nearly quadruple what Bexley can afford? That's an insult, if I ever heard one."

"This isn't about you or any amount of money you could ever pay me." I take in a deep breath, drawing the courage to give Dexter what he deserves. My honesty. "Anderson and I have a history that was undeniable when I showed back up here. I had told myself that whatever feelings I once had for him were done and over. But—"

"But you were weak. You didn't want to commit to me, but you're willing to lose your entire career over him? He must mean a hell of a lot to you."

I nod. There's no use denying anything now. "He does mean a lot to me, and I'm sorry. I didn't mean for any of this to happen when I took on this project. My career, the opportunities you've provided, and all I've learned at Urgency mean a great deal to me. If you're here to fire me, then do it."

Something in Dexter's expression changes. His gaze loses its fire, and his frown falls. "I'm not here to fire you. You can stay at Urgency. You've earned you keep, and your clients love you. That promotion I promised you is still there too."

"I don't understand. What about Mallory? She told me everything, Dexter. What she knows, why I've always received the short end of the stick. She doesn't want me to have that raise."

He doesn't even flinch. "Let me deal with Mallory."

"Why do I feel like there's a catch in there somewhere?"

He nods. "There is. I want you back in the office today. I'm taking you off Bexley's account, and this time I don't care what you or Anderson say. You're going to have to choose."

My heart squeezes tight, and I hate how conflicted his ultimatum makes me feel.

"Even if that means losing my business?" I jump at the voice coming from behind me. Swiveling, I see Anderson approaching, his frown deeply woven into his features. "Because I'm not holding to my end of the contract if I'm not working with the project manager you were hired to provide."

Dexter's gaze hardens on Anderson. "With all due respect, Mr. Bexley, I do not give a fuck. You need Urgency more than Urgency needs you. We can see the contract through if you want, but you'll do it with Mallory, not Hope. Take it or leave it. I won't even sue you for backing out of the contract early. We can end things just as they are." He looks at me. "While I'm still signing

Hope's checks, I have to draw the line somewhere. As a businessman yourself, surely you can understand that."

"Funny." Anderson tilts his head. "I didn't take you for a rules-following kind of guy."

Dexter smiles. "Why's that? Because I fucked your girl on every surface of my office?"

Anderson lurches forward, but I slam my arm into his chest before he can get any closer to Dexter, which is enough force to make him stop and look at me.

"Stop." I glare at them both. "No one is getting into a fight. I don't think what Dexter is asking is unfair either."

"Are you kidding me, Hope?" Anderson asks. "How can you even consider still working for this prick?"

"Because he's giving me a choice, and this is the best option for everyone," I snap back. Although the thought of continuing to work for Dexter turns my stomach, I don't want to get blackballed in the industry if I refuse his offer. I can't afford that kind of ding on my record, especially when Dexter is offering me a way out. I can have the job, and I can have Anderson too.

I give Anderson a pleading look, begging him to understand. "I don't want to lose my job. I also don't want to leave you. At least we can still be together this way."

"Then work here," he pleads. "You don't have to go back to being an activities director. Everything you're doing for Urgency, you can do here."

His words spark through me like a lit match. He's right. I could continue doing what I love, but do it for Camp Bexley.

"I'm afraid you're incorrect." Dexter steps forward, far too close to Anderson to mean anything good.

My heart sinks.

"Hope signed a noncompete that denies her the right to work in any nature deemed competitive to Urgency for two years."

"Two years?" I shriek. I try to remember that day in HR's office when I signed the final paperwork for the job. There was a noncompete, but it wasn't like I had a choice in signing the damn thing. And at the time, I was too thankful for the job to consider the ramifications.

Anderson takes a step forward, ignoring my arm still pressed against his chest. "That noncompete won't hold up in court."

Dexter slips a piece of paper out of his pocket and holds it up for us both to see. It's a photo of Anderson and me, locked in each other's arms outside my cabin, and I'm completely naked. "My noncompete will fare quite well with this attached to it."

Anderson swipes at the image, grabs it, and crumbles it into a ball. "You fucking asshole. You have no right to step foot on my camp and dictate Hope's future the way you've done the past year. She doesn't need you or your job. This is her home, and this is where she's staying."

My heart is racing while I look wide-eyed at Anderson. "You can't make that decision for me."

Anderson glares down at me. "The hell I can't." He points furiously at Dexter. "You're not going back to Seattle with this prick. No fucking way."

I shake my head slowly, drawing in a deep, steady breath as I do. I pull Anderson a few feet away so we can talk in private. "You're doing it again," I whisper. "You're trying to make me think I have no other choice, but this is my decision to make. I'm sorry, but you're going to need to trust me to make it on my own."

His jaw drops. "Are you serious? You're actually considering this? You could pick up and leave, just like that?"

I squeeze my eyes shut. "I didn't choose that. I'm saying it's my choice."

He looks genuinely confused and hurt as he shakes his head and steps closer so only I can hear him. "Letting you leave for Seattle last time was the biggest mistake of my life. I can't lose you again. And the fact that Dexter is even giving you the option to go back to the office doesn't sit right with me. He still wants you. He's just going to get close to you again."

"Then you'll need to trust me because I'm not in love with him. I'm in love with you. I'm also terrified to burn this bridge before I have a chance to find something else."

"You're giving him so much power. Look at him." Anderson throws Dexter a disgusted look. "He thinks he owns you."

"You need to trust me."

Anderson's anger fades, transitioning into sadness. I plead with him again with my eyes. "Look, we're all worked up right now. I can't let whatever I decide in the heat of the moment fuck with my future. Whatever I decide, you'll need to be okay with."

Anderson looks over my shoulder at Dexter. "If Hope decides to go, then it's you who will be in breach of contract. You understand that, right?"

Dexter nods. “I’ll accept that responsibility. I’ll even refund you for the remaining budget.”

Anderson looks back at me, furious but also a little bit desperate. He hooks his arm around my waist and pulls me in. “And I’m not making the same mistake twice with you. I’m going to do what I should have done last year. I’m going to beg you to stay. I love you, Hope.” His voice cracks, and his eyes plead with mine. “Please don’t go.”

My chest swells, I wrap my arms around him, and I look up into his eyes. “I love you, too, Anderson. More today than ever before, and I don’t want to leave.” A war is waging in my heart and mind, a gruesome battle, and I don’t even know which side I’m on. “It’s important for me to figure this out myself.”

“Why are you being so stubborn about this? We’re finally together.”

“And we still will be. Me leaving doesn’t change anything between us, but...” I blink back a fresh set of tears while I search for words that will make him understand. “You’re still the man who broke my heart last year. And while I’m very happy with where we’re at now, I’m terrified to build my world around a man. By staying here and working for you, that’s exactly what I’d be doing. Let me pave my own way, and I promise I’ll be back. I just need some time.” I look deep into his eyes. “Can you give me that?”

Anderson’s jaw clenches, but before he can say anything, Dexter is standing right beside us. “Enough chitter-chatter. What’ll it be, Hope? If your choice is Urgency, then we’ll need to be on our way to catch the next ferry out.”

I whip my head toward Dexter, the words “I quit” on the tip of my tongue. “I won’t be going anywhere today. I’ll need to pack and wrap things up here. You can expect to see me in the office tomorrow.”

His jaw ticks. “Very well.” He pushes past us toward the parking lot while sliding his sunglasses over his eyes. “If you’re not at your desk at nine a.m, I’ll consider that your resignation.”

I look at Anderson, my eyes pleading while we wait for Dexter to drive off. My heart feels like it’s tearing in two, but I’m confident that whatever happens next, it needs to be me who decides. “Come with me.”

“To Seattle?”

I nod, feeling a glimmer of hope spark in my chest. “Yeah. Just for the next few days while I get settled back in.”

Anderson’s breaths slow while he searches my eyes. “I know nothing

about the city.”

I smile and hug him to me. “I can be your tour guide. Or”—I shimmy my body against his—“we can hang out in my apartment. Naked.”

Anderson smiles, and my heart beats faster. I feel like he might just say yes, and it would be like one of my biggest fantasies coming true. There were so many times when I dreamed Anderson would pop by for a surprise visit. Just the idea of my hot, bearded man stepping through my downtown Seattle apartment doors gives me a thrill I never thought I’d come close to.

“You drive a hard bargain,” he says against my lips.

“Is that a yes?”

His smile grows wider. “It’s a yes.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

ANDERSON

It's disheartening watching Hope pack her things, even though I'll get to be right there by her side. At least for a few days. I start tackling items on my long to-do list, heading to the stables first then the cafeteria, marina, and front office. Mostly to make sure things are shut down and doors are locked. When I arrive at Hope's cabin, it's clear it will still take her a while to pack.

"Aren't you meeting up with Jami tonight?" Hope asks as she's walking to her suitcase from her closet.

"I am." I finish folding everything she's already tossed into her suitcase and look at her. "I was going to wait for you."

She shrugs. "You don't have to. When I'm done packing, I'll head over to the saloon. Go enjoy your brotherly time. Maybe you can even talk him into watching over the camp for you while you're gone." She smiles. "And then maybe he'll want to stay longer."

Hope has theorized there's more to Jami's visit than he's let on, considering my brother's interest in the camp's financial affairs. But I am too afraid to get my hopes up, especially after our talk in the saloon. "That's definitely not going to happen. He's just being nosy."

Hope smiles, and we stop at her car. "He's only nosy because he cares."

"Not enough to return for good. He can be our financial analyst from anywhere." I stand up and wrap my arms around her waist. "Enough talk about Jami. Are you sure about all this? I just want to make it very clear that if you choose to stay, you'll be taken care of. You'll have a cabin, a job... me." I give her my best exaggerated pout and bend down to meet her forehead with mine.

"For the hundredth time, I'm sure." She kisses my pout. "This will be good for both of us. And you'll finally get to see where I've spent all my time

this past year.”

“You going to give me a tour of your office too?”

She gives me a warning look and shakes her head. “Not a chance in hell. Now go. I won’t be far behind you.”

My heart tightens as I give her one parting glance and then walk away. It’s nearing sunset when I get to the saloon and see the inside lights on. Jami’s sitting at the bar, this time with a beer, a zoned-out look in his eyes.

“Drinks aren’t free for guests, brother.”

Jami’s head swivels toward me, his brow pitched. “Add it to my tab.”

“Ah,” I say before sitting next to him. “That would require you to stick around for a while.”

Jami smiles. “Nice try. You seem to have things under control here. I wouldn’t mind stopping back from time to time.” He looks at me like his comment is an olive branch, an extended hand that he’s asking me to shake.

“I’d like that.”

He reaches over the bar, grabs beer out of an ice bucket he must have filled, and hands it to me. “So, what’s all the drama about?”

I chuckle and shake my head. “You caught wind of that, huh?”

Jami chuckles too. “I did. Sorry to eavesdrop, but the walls are still too thin. That Mallory chick sure is a piece of work, but Dexter might just be worse.”

I cringe. “How much did you hear?”

Jami levels me with a look. “Enough to know that Hope is leaving tomorrow.” He searches my eyes. “You okay?”

After a swig of beer, I give him a brief rundown of where Hope and I stand.

“Oof. That bastard Van Clark won your girl after all.”

My stomach twists because I can’t argue with my brother. In a sense, Dexter did win. In a single threat, he took away Hope, my grand reopening, and all the planning that came with it.

“It’s temporary. She’ll be back. In fact, I’m heading out to Seattle to stay with her for a few days.” I clap Jami on the back. “Feel free to look after things here while I’m gone.”

He smiles but doesn’t respond immediately. Instead, he swirls his beer, a glazed-over look on his face. “You ever wonder how life would have turned out if Ty hadn’t died?”

The heaviness of his question rises and falls like waves in my chest.

“Every damn day.” I tip my beer back and swallow. “How do you think that would have played out?”

Jami leans into the counter. “I think Dad wouldn’t have completely lost it. I would have stayed, and you would have still stayed, of course. I think Benny and Ty would have stayed too.”

“You do?”

“Yup.”

“What about Cayson?”

He twists his lips. “I can picture it either way. He was so young when our family started to fall apart. He might have still wanted to leave.” Jami looks at me. “What do you think would have happened?”

“I think for years I believed we would have all stayed, even Mom and Dad. But now...” I shake my head. “I don’t know what I believe anymore other than that if you’re all meant to be here, then you’ll be back.”

“Now that is something I can’t imagine. We’re too fucked up, brother.”

“Yeah, but we don’t have to be. You ever wonder why we’re all so damn angry?” I raise my brows at Jami, locking eyes with him. “It’s because we all care. The only way any of us will heal is if we do it together.”

Hope walks in while Jami is on the other side of the bar pouring out something stiffer than a beer. When he sees her, he grabs another shot glass then slides them all forward on the bar. “You both need this more than me.”

Hope smiles at my brother, and he winks back at her. Something about the exchange warms my chest. It’s clear they’ve bonded on some level over the past few days, and I like that.

“So, what’s your plan, Hope?” Jami asks. “Going back to the office and then what?”

Hope swallows her shot and slides the glass back to Jami. “I’m playing it by ear.” She raises her hands like she’s surrendering. “We’ll see what happens.”

“Either way, you’re going to be okay.”

She smiles and leans into me. “I am now that I have you.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket, so I grab it, and look at the screen to find my mom’s name illuminated. “It’s Mom.” I look at Jami, wondering if he thinks this is as strange as I do. “She never calls during the week.”

Jami’s forehead creases, and I can see that he’s having the same thoughts as I am. “Unless something is wrong.”

I tap to answer and put her on speakerphone. “Hey, Mom. You’re on

speakerphone. Jami stopped by the camp.” I wrap my arm around Hope so she knows I’m not leaving her out. I’m just not sure if this is the time for introductions, considering my mom’s impromptu call.

“Oh, hi, Jami. I was going to call you next,” she says, her voice unsteady. “Look, something happened...”

My heart drops, and I look at Jami to find his jaw hardening. “Is it Dad?” I ask.

“No, your dad’s right here. He’s fine.”

Despite everything, my sigh of relief is deep.

“Hi, boys.” My dad’s gruff tone is more subdued than I remember. He sounds tired, old, grumpy... like he’s given up on the world.

Jami’s lips flatline, and I know that means he won’t be responding, so I continue. “Okay, then what’s going on?”

“It’s Cayson,” my mom says. “There’s been an accident.”

It feels like time stops when I hear my baby brother’s name. I try to brace myself for the worst thing our parents could possibly tell us, but there’s no preparing or cushioning the blow for death. There’s just a black hole, expanding the closer I get to whatever my mom called to say.

I release Hope and lean into the bar to set my phone between Jami and me. “What kind of accident?”

“His plane went down this morning, somewhere over the North Atlantic.”

The shock already zinging through me quadruples. “What?” My voice is a shaky whisper.

“They’ve located him, and they’re airlifting him to the hospital out there, but...”

My entire body is shaking now. Not even Jami’s presence can provide comfort. “But what, Mom?”

“H-He’s unresponsive.”

No, no, no. This cannot be happening again. I start to jump out of my seat when Jami clamps a hand down around my arm and leans closer to the phone. “Where are they taking him?”

“I don’t have the details yet, but they’re sending them as soon as they have more information. I’m going to fly there while your dad looks over things here. I just don’t want Cay to be alone when he wakes up.”

When. I breathe a sigh of relief at the hopeful word. *When, not if.*

“I’ll go too.” The words rush out before I’ve even thought them through. Then I look over at Hope, who is sliding her arms around me. A sign of

sympathy. A comforting embrace. Not a single sign of disappointment at the fact that our Seattle plans must change.

Jami squeezes my arm. “I’ll go with him.” Our eyes connect, and I nod. “Mom,” Jami starts again. “Do you know anything else, like what caused the crash?”

She lets out a small cry that I can tell she’s been trying to hold back. “They didn’t tell me much, other than that he was on his way back to North Carolina from a mission delivering hurricane relief supplies to Puerto Rico. The turbulence was too much, and there was an unfortunate mishap. There were twelve other airmen with him. I don’t know if any of them made it out yet. It’s just too early to tell.”

“What the hell is an unfortunate mishap?” Jami bursts out.

“We don’t know, son,” my dad’s gruff voice responds. “Your mother and I tried to get as much information as possible before we called.”

It takes several seconds before I manage to breathe. Hope keeps holding on to me. She doesn’t say anything, but it’s as though she’s whispering optimistic words in my ear, reminding me that *unresponsive* doesn’t mean *dead*. That Cayson’s going to be okay.

“Does Benny know?” It’s the only other question I can think of to ask.

“If the son of bitch ever answered his phone—”

Dad’s grumble is cut short by my mom. “Hush, Andrew. This is not the time for any of your nonsense.”

Jami and I look at each other. He seems to be as surprised as me at our mother’s assertiveness. She never dared speak to him like that when we were younger. At least, not that we ever witnessed.

My mom sighs. “I’ve tried reaching out to Benny, but the last number I had for him was disconnected years ago. Maybe you two will have more luck, but I think the only person he still spoke with was Cayson. They’re close.”

This is another shocking fact that I never would have guessed myself. My chest is as heavy as a ton of bricks. I can feel it in every struggling breath. “They were? Since when?”

My mom sighs. “Since always. Cayson would always keep me informed during our weekly calls, but he never divulged much. I suspect he wanted to respect your brother’s privacy. You know Benny. He’s a private guy and very much disconnected from the world. He’s just living off the grid and having the time of his life.”

I clench my jaw, my chest raw from the fact that Benson chose Cayson to keep in touch with rather than Jami and me. It hurts.

“Maybe he’ll catch word of this somehow and call,” my mom says, her tone hopeful.

“Don’t hold your breath.” Jami’s words are bitter, his anger toward Benny far more intense than anybody else’s. I’ve never really understood why, other than that Jami and Benson always had the biggest blowups of all the brothers.

I nudge Jami and throw him a glare. This is not the time. “Hey, Mom, Cayson’s going to be okay. Keep us updated, and let us know if there’s anything we can do. We’ll see you soon.”

After I hang up, everything goes quiet between Jami, Hope, and me. I’m replaying the conversation with Mom as though there are clues about Cayson’s safety. But it’s too silent for too long. Anger is beginning to replace the shock, and it’s spinning faster the longer time goes on.

“We’re not losing another fucking brother, you hear me?”

Jami nods, his jaw still hard.

Cayson was the baby. The most innocent of us all. He doesn’t deserve to be in this situation after a mission that probably saved thousands of lives. He’s a hero, which is more than I can say about any other Bexley.

“So, now what?” Jami asks, looking as lost as I feel.

I swallow. “I guess this means we’re going to North Carolina.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

HOPE

My heels clack against the downtown Seattle pavement, causing me to cringe. It's Monday, three days since the ferry transported me to Anacortes and I made the drive back to Seattle. My first thought was that the city felt as foreign to me now as it did when I first arrived last year. That feeling hasn't changed, and today feels heavier than any other day since.

I stop at the corner cafe and wait in line to grab my coffee. Not even my old routine can jar me back into my previous state of mind, when the city was new, fresh, and exciting. Back then, I was blissfully unaware of the large bandage I'd taped over my heart in an effort to move on as quickly as possible from Anderson Bexley. Now everything just feels... wrong.

My phone feels hot in my hands since I've been checking it nonstop, awaiting any and every message from Anderson to let me know how he and his brothers are doing. So far, all has been pretty much the same.

Cayson was airlifted to a hospital in Fayetteville, where he's been hooked up to monitors ever since. He's in a coma, not breathing on his own, and still marked as in critical condition.

I step forward in line, praying today is the day Anderson will get good news. Maybe it's my lack of sleep while I await to hear from Anderson or the fact that I'm in Seattle heading to a job that no longer feels like my dream, but a shadow is now cast over my heart.

I remember my first day in Seattle when I was clueless as to what the future held but excited. Excited for a fresh start and ready for anything. In retrospect, maybe I was a little too ready. Too naive. Too completely blindsided by the glitz and glamor of city life.

For a while there, I truly started to believe city life was *better*. It only took a week in Orcas Island to know just how jaded I'd become.

Once I have my coffee in hand, I head toward the office, jerking to a stop the moment I feel my phone going off in my pocket. When I see that it's Anderson, I hold my breath, praying for good news. "Hey," I answer.

"Hey," he says, his upbeat tone not at all what I had anticipated. "They took Cayson off the ventilator this morning, and he's breathing on his own."

A sigh of relief blows through me. "That's great news." My heart clenches, knowing that's the first step in a long list of things that need to go right for Cayson to be back to full health. "He still hasn't woken up?"

There's a shuffling noise, like Anderson's head is on a pillow or something. I know he's been sleeping at the hospital with Jami. I can't imagine how exhausted they must be.

"They said they're more hopeful today than they were yesterday, but there aren't any guarantees. Now that he's breathing on his own, it's a waiting game until he opens his eyes."

"He'll be so relieved to see you when he does."

"Yeah," Anderson says, sounding hopeful. "Doc says it's a long road to recovery. He'll need somewhere to live where he can be looked after. Mom offered to look after him, but Jami and I don't feel comfortable with that since Dad is such a loose cannon." A few beats of silence pass between us. "I think I'm going to bring him back to camp so he can heal at home. He'll have his own nurse and me. Jami will come to visit. Even Mom said she'd come often."

My heart swells. This may not be the family picture Anderson had in mind when he renovated Camp Bexley, but it sure sounds like something close to it. "I think that's a great idea."

"It's not how I wanted to get any of my brothers home, but I just want him to be okay, you know?"

I let out a sigh. "Of course, Anderson. Speaking of home. Is everything okay at camp? Silver offered her seaplane if you need me to check on things while you're away."

"Thanks, but I think the staff has it all covered. They're a well-oiled machine at this point."

I smile, remembering how much that statement rings true. Anderson always has his hands in everything, but that doesn't discount that he trusts his team to be accountable. "Let me know, okay? I feel antsy being here while you're there. Maybe I can come this weekend."

"As much as I would love that, they wouldn't even let you into the

hospital here. You should stay.”

My frown is so heavy, I can feel it weighing down my chest. “Is Jami still there with you?”

“Yeah, and Mom too. We’ve been taking shifts.”

“Good. What about Benson? Any word from him?”

Anderson sighs. “Nope. Nothing.”

I look at the skyscraper looming in front of me and squeeze my eyes shut. “Dexter’s back in the office today.” I got lucky at work last Friday with Dexter having to fly to California for that business trip he kept delaying. “I don’t want to see him.”

“Well, you can’t really avoid him, seeing that he’s your boss.”

I know Anderson hates me being here, but he has also given me his grace and trust to figure this out on my own. I’m so appreciative. “I’ve been applying for other jobs. There’s a position at BelleCurve actually. It’s in their production department, so Dexter can’t wave the noncompetes. I think I could really like it.”

“I like that company. They hold some big events at the camp.” He lets out a chuckle. “Should have hired them in the first place.”

My lips turn up at the sides. “Be careful, Bexley. If you hadn’t hired Urgency, where would we be now?”

“I’d like to think you’d be coming to your senses about now.” His voice rumbles softly in my ear. “We would have wound up together somehow, Hope. Fate has a funny way of playing out.”

My chest warms at his words. “You’re such a romantic.”

“Only for you.” There’s another shuffling sound, and then Anderson’s voice comes back on the line. “Hey, I’ve got to go. Doctor’s here with some news. I’ll call you tonight, okay?”

My heart rate quickens. “Okay. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The stiff, cold air blowing through Urgency’s lobby is a stark contrast to nature’s breeze around camp. And the expensive artwork, bare lobby, and fancy wallpaper are other reminders of how I never fit in to this place. I tried. And maybe I even eventually figured out how to play the part, but until Anderson broke my heart that fateful night more than a year ago, I’d never had any desire to fit into anyone’s mold.

Broken hearts have the power to change lives, to alter futures, and to destroy one's innocence. But loved hearts... those have the power to heal.

That's what this past week has felt like. Healing. And now, I'm ready to fight whatever battle is in store for me because I'm starting to forget what I was holding on to.

I've barely gotten to my desk when Dexter's authoritative tone chimes over my phone intercom. "Miss Davies, I'd like to see you in my office now."

My entire body cringes at the familiar tone. This has been the moment I've been dreading.

"I'll be right in."

I knock on Dexter's office door. The shades facing the hallway are drawn, like always, and his door is ajar. So I push my way inside to find him sitting behind his desk tapping away at his keyboard, lighting dim save for the natural light coming through the window at his back.

He doesn't look up from his computer, and this time I don't make a grand entrance. I just let the door click shut behind me and move quietly to my seat on the other side of his desk.

It's been so weird to be back at Urgency, but it's especially strange to sit here again. The attraction I once felt for my boss feels so foreign to me now. But I understand fully why I fell for Dexter. Other than the fact that he's a gorgeous man, powerful, and persistent in getting what he wants, I think what attracted me the most was how opposite he is to Anderson. He was safe, as long as we kept it casual.

Looking back, guilt starts to gnaw away at me. While I didn't understand it before, I know now that I used Dexter. And he has every right to be upset at me for that. While he was wanting more, I was pulling away. I just never completely understood why until I saw Anderson again.

Even then, I tried to fight my attraction for the man who broke me, but I couldn't. Not when he was wrapped up in a package that felt like home. Camp Bexley is where I belong—with Anderson, with the staff, among nature, and all the beautiful things that come with a familiar place. Now the only thing holding me back is the noncompetitor Dexter threatened me with.

A minute later, Dexter's fingers slow on the keyboard, and he looks up, as if begrudgingly. "I'll admit, I wasn't sure if you'd stick it out this week."

"Did I have another choice?"

He quirks a brow. "You have many. Probably none that you love as much as this one."

"I do love my job."

He breathes in deeply while he nods then turns his head to face the window. “Do you love him?”

For some strange reason, I did not expect to talk about Anderson in our meeting today. I figured, if anything, that Dexter would want to move straight back into business without discussing old wounds.

“Yes, and I am sorry for any hurt that I caused you. It was never my intention.”

“I had high hopes for you, Miss Davies. For us.”

“I know.” I tip my chin up, holding on to my strength even when weakness wants to creep in and take hold. “When I first came to Urgency, my heart was broken.”

“And Bexley is the one who broke it?”

I nod. “I didn’t think I could forgive him. I didn’t *want* to forgive him.”

“But you did.”

Another nod. “I’m so sorry, Dexter.”

“Well, then.” He clears his throat, his eyes settling back on me. “You’ve earned your promotion and your raise. HR has already been notified, and you’ll start to see your increase reflected in your next paycheck. Congratulations, Miss. Davies. You may leave.” He pushes away from his desk and stands, facing the window with his hands shoved into his pockets.

I start to walk to the door when I hear a faint, “Hope.”

My hand pauses on the doorknob. “Yes?”

“He broke your heart once. He could do it again.”

I look back at him, filling my lungs with air. “That won’t happen.”

He tips his chin up. “How can you be so sure?”

“It’s simple.” I search Dexter’s gaze while my chest warms at my own certainty. “If he breaks my heart, he breaks his own. They beat together now.”

“That’s bullshit,” Dexter spits out. He steps around his desk, making it halfway across the room before stopping again. “You’re back in my world now. I’m not planning to make this easy on you.”

My entire body tenses as his meaning settles in. He isn’t talking about my job. He’s talking about us. “I’d like to ask that you respect my relationship.”

His glowering eyes meet mine. “I’m afraid I won’t be able to do that.”

It’s in that moment that everything becomes clear because it doesn’t matter what type of job I hold—or where. None of it means anything without Anderson in my life, and any threat to that needs to go.

“Then I quit.” I squeeze the door handle while I watch the surprise in his eyes. “I was going to wait until I secured another job first, because I know what you’re capable of, but I think I’d rather take my chances.”

His eyes create narrower slits. “Are you forgetting about your noncompete already?”

I tilt my head, meeting his challenging stare. “No, I’ve just had time to read the fine print. The noncompete states I can’t work in a competing role within one hundred miles of here.” I smile. “Camp Bexley is over one hundred miles away. Not to say that’s where I’ll wind up, but at least I can keep my options open.”

His teeth are gritted. “And what about the education I’ve been paying for?”

I shrug. “I’ll pay for it myself.”

He’s practically steaming with anger. “You walk out that door, and you’ll never find a job like this one again,” he hisses. “I’ll make sure of it.”

I let out a laugh. “Don’t start doing me any favors.” I wink and swing the door open, refusing to honor him with another glance. “Goodbye, Dexter. Thanks for everything.” And then I walk away, straight to the exit, but not before catching Mallory’s eye, grinning, and flipping her the bird.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

ANDERSON

The steady beeping of the monitor keeps me awake while Cayson remains in an unconscious state. It's been five days since the accident that almost took my brother's life, and the hours just feel like they're getting longer. Jami, my mom, and I are still taking shifts watching over Cayson while we do what work we can in between. It's easier for Jami with his laptop setup, but for me, it's one phone call after the other coordinating with vendors and staff to make sure operations continue to run smoothly.

Until the first miracle of the day happens.

"Dude, you need to stop checking in. We're fine here." Timmy, our head camp counselor, finally lays in on me. "We've got it covered. Go spend this time with your brother."

I smile into the phone, my appreciation unmatched. "Oh, yeah? Then who's going to keep you in line, Timmy?"

He snorts. "Your sister."

At first, I think he's just spitting me a variation of a *your mama* joke and then I realize he might actually be serious. "Is Silver there?"

Timmy chuckles. "She's been here since Sunday. Said she didn't want you to know because she knew you'd tell her it's not her responsibility or some shit."

"That's an accurate assumption."

I hang up and immediately call Silver. She answers the phone with a sigh. "Good news sure travels fast here."

Rolling my eyes, I clutch the phone tighter and smile. "You really didn't have to step in like that..." My chest begins to swell with emotion. "But thank you for doing it."

Silver gets quiet for a second. "Please tell me Cay's okay."

“Steady progress, but he’s still not opening his eyes.”

“Well, I’ll be here as long as you need me. King is here, too, helping out.”

“Geez, that’s nice of him. Shouldn’t he be in the Super Bowl or something?”

Silver chuckles lightly. “I’m a little afraid of what he’ll do to you if you ask him that to his face. He’s still a little sour over the last playoff game.”

Hours later, when my evening shift is ending, a second miracle comes.

“I’m going to grab some dinner.” I clap Jami on the shoulder as we pass each other in the hallway. “Want me to get you anything?”

He has a stupid grin on his face while he shakes his head. “Nah, I ate with Mom.” Then he winks. “Enjoy your meal.”

It is such a weird exchange that I don’t understand at all, until I walk past the main lobby to get to the cafeteria and spot a familiar face. I think my heart explodes from my chest in that moment. It’s a mixture of relief, confusion, and happiness, and it detonates inside me like a fireworks show on the darkest night.

Hope gets a running start before she leaps into my arms and clings to me like we’ve been apart for months instead of days. Her firm hold around my neck is just the elixir I need to release waves of pent-up tension in my body. I didn’t realize that I’d been compressing it down and bottling it up so tight until the tears start to come. Not just tears. Full-on, grown-man baby sobs begin to rack my body, and it all releases like a flood, drenching Hope in everything I need to try to let go. My fears, my anger, my regrets. The weight of it all is too much. Not even I can hold it in anymore.

Hope pulls me into an empty waiting room and climbs onto my lap, hugging me tightly until my tears dry and my heart begins to calm, then I meet her beautiful eyes. “I was not expecting to see you here.”

She cups my face and tilts her head. “I wasn’t going to let you keep me away.”

I shake my head, my sigh releasing as I move. “I didn’t think they’d allow you up here. How did you get in?”

She smiles and presses her lips to mine. “If anyone asks, I’m your sister.”

My chuckle is deep and booming, bringing a different set of tears to my eyes this time. Happiness. “I’ve never been so attracted to one of my siblings in my life.”

She grins before kissing me again. “I’m a lucky woman.”

Finally, once the fog of seeing her dissipates, I pull back slightly. “Everything okay back home?”

Her smile slips some, but she nods. “Better than okay. I quit my job yesterday.”

“You did what?” I can feel my jaw go slack.

“And then,” she continues, “I started traveling here yesterday. It just took me awhile between ferry rides and sold-out flights. I finally got on a wait list, and here I am. I hope it’s okay.”

My eyes slam closed, and I lean in to rest my head on her shoulder. “Of course it’s okay. But why did you quit? I thought working at Urgency was what you wanted.”

“What I wanted,” she stresses, “was the choice. For once in my life, I wanted to make up my own damn mind without feeling like I had no other option. It didn’t take long to figure out what I truly want.”

“And what’s that?”

She smiles, causing my heart rate to quicken. “You, silly. Everything else will fall into place. My career is something I’ll always be working toward. No one said I had to be working my dream job now. I’m young. There’s so much I want to try and do. But I want to do it at Camp Bexley. With you by my side.” She rolls her eyes to the ceiling and purses her lips in the cutest damn expression I’ve ever seen her wear. “If you’ll have me.”

I brush my lips against hers, moving slowly, not wanting to miss a single beat of this moment. “Oh, I’ll have you all right. I’ll even give you a key.”

She pulls back, amusement glowing on her face. “To your house?”

“To my camp. I need a partner. It might as well be someone who knows the place better than me.”

Shock is written all over her face. “What about your brothers?”

I shrug. “It will always be their home too. When they decide to come back. But I don’t want to do it alone anymore. You don’t have to worry about your noncompetes either. Dexter breached his contract by dismissing me as a client, remember? I’ve already spoken with my lawyer. There’s no way in hell he can touch you no matter what capacity you work in at the camp. Case closed.”

Her smile blossoms again. “It sounds like you’ve been thinking about this quite a bit. I have been too. I read over the fine print again and found something else. He can’t stop me from working outside a one-hundred-mile radius. Guess how far Camp Bexley is from Urgency?”

I tilt my head, amused by her research. “How far?”

“One hundred and ten miles. We’re untouchable, Bexley.”

My heart thunders in my chest. “I could have told you that.” I pull her close and nuzzle her neck while breathing in her vanilla scent. “Looks like you have plenty of options now.”

She curls into me. “Oh, Anderson. I don’t need options anymore. We move forward together. I love you,” she whispers.

“I love you too.” I press my lips to hers before I realize something. I pull back slightly so I can search her eyes. “Wait. So, is that a yes to being my partner?”

She laughs and then nods. “That’s a *hell* yes.”

Our lips meld together again, and our kiss deepens... until a third miracle comes.

“Andy!”

Jami’s voice can be heard down the corridor before he bursts into the room. “Andy,” he says again, his eyes wide with excitement. “It’s Cayson. He’s awake.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

HOPE

TWO WEEKS LATER

There's something calming about the frenzy happening all around me. Golf carts whiz by in every direction as they transfer staff and party supplies from one location to another. Gourmet skillet scents waft from the cafeteria kitchen as staff prepare for the feast of the century. Tuning notes from the live band can be heard for miles while the musicians do their sound check on the sports field.

We're only hours away from Camp Bexley's grand reopening, and my nerves are zinging through me like a pinball machine. All the vendors are accounted for. Staff members are trained and ready. Everything is going precisely as I planned. But it's what I can't control that ties my nerve endings up in knots. What if no one shows?

When Anderson and I returned from North Carolina, I hit the ground running. The invitations I'd prepared before Dexter yanked my project away from me were all ready to go, so I started there. Over two thousand invitations went out addressed to local businesses, previous guests, and the media. Of course, the people who were invited won't all show, but my hope is that a healthy handful of them will.

"Give me that."

Before I can even look at Silver, she's swiping the walkie-talkie out of my hand. "What are you doing?" I squeal. "I'm waiting for the kegs to arrive to get the saloon stocked." We still don't have a liquor license, so beer and wine are the most we'll be able to provide tonight.

Silver tilts her head—a disapproving look on her gorgeous face. "I

thought Jami was in charge of saloon operations tonight.”

“He is. That’s why I’m out here greeting his vendor.”

Silver laughs. “I’ll take care of that. You need to get yourself dressed for the party.”

She sweeps a hand to indicate my black leggings and dirty, old T-shirt, and I realize just how far behind schedule I am. Silver’s already decked out in a pair of light-wash jeans, a white V-neck top, a yellow long-sleeve velvet duster, and accessories to boot.

“You don’t mind? It should only take me an hour—”

“Take two.” She walks behind me and places her hands on my shoulders. “Now go.” With a little push, I’m on my way to Anderson’s house—or *our* house, as he keeps reminding me.

It wasn’t a difficult decision to move in together once we returned to camp. Why take space in a staff cabin when we both know we’ll be together every night? It seemed silly.

I walk through the living room to get to the main set of stairs when the downstairs guest-room door opens, and Anderson walks out already somewhat dressed. He rarely ever dresses up, but when he does, I get a little bit crazy inside at the sight of him.

His khakis fit him just right, hugging him enough to show off his sculpted ass and thighs. His white long-sleeve button-down is hanging open, exposing his toned front. His beard is freshly trimmed, so it’s a thick coat of fuzz drawing attention to lips I love to kiss. And his thick mane of brown hair is still wet from a recent shower, making his natural golden streaks shine in the overhead light.

I walk toward him and wrap my arms around his waist, noting the conflicted look in his eyes. “How is he?” My chest squeezes, knowing tonight has got to be hard for Anderson and Jami when Cayson is still in bad shape.

For three days after Cayson came out of his coma, he didn’t utter a single word before his eyes fell shut again in a deep sleep.

“Brain function will return, but there’s no saying by how much. Anything is possible. All we can do is allow him to rest, wait, and provide rehabilitation as time goes on.”

After that doozy of a diagnosis, with a few dozen medical terms added in, Anderson and his mom made arrangements for Cayson to be transported to Camp Bexley where he could be looked after full time. Between Anderson,

Jami, Silver, and myself, we've been making it work, but hiring a full-time nurse was the best thing they could have done.

"Same." Anderson speaks quietly while darting a glance over his shoulder.

I look over Anderson's shoulder to find the sweet silver-haired nurse checking Cayson's feeding tube. She's been a godsend in the last few days she's been here.

"He was awake for a bit, but he looked so confused." He shakes his head. "I feel so bad for him. I'm sure Camp Bexley is the last place he wants to be."

I tilt my head and squeeze him tighter. "You don't know that. Cayson didn't leave here because of your father or what happened to Ty. The way you and Jami make it sound, Cayson wanted an epic adventure."

Anderson's frown deepens. "He found one all right. I just want to know that he's making progress."

"He's out of the coma. That's huge. Give him time."

Anderson nods. "You're right." He narrows his eyes. "You're always right."

I smile and tug him away from the door and toward our bedroom on the other side of the house. "Tonight will be a good distraction for everyone. Cayson is in good hands with Nurse Margaret, Jami's got his hands full at the saloon, Silver's running around helping out wherever help is needed, and you'll have me by your side."

He stops me in the doorway and leans me against the frame. "Right"—he kisses my nose— "where you"—his lips slide to the corner of my mouth—"belong." Our mouths move together as he holds me close. All the while, I'm tugging him into the room until we're collapsing on the bed, our lips never parting. "I should get out there." He groans when my palm slides over his chest. "Or I could stay."

I giggle and shake my head. "No, you should go. I need a shower anyway."

Not even his sweetest plea can stop me from dashing into the shower to cleanse myself of the sweat and dirt after a long day of work. He'll thank me later. I take my time under the hot water, feeling grateful for everything that led me to where I am today. For the first time in my life, my home isn't just a temporary place where I spend each day trying, hoping, and praying I'll be accepted. Camp Bexley is my forever home. And I'll never change a single

event that led me to this place where I've gained such conviction for that fact. No regrets.

When I'm done with my shower, I wrap myself in a towel and walk back out in the bedroom to get to the closet. I stop in my tracks when I see Anderson still lying on the bed, shirt still unbuttoned and eyes closed while he takes deep breaths. I smile and lean over him, tapping his bare chest gently. "Hey, sleepyhead. You've got a party to get to."

Anderson stirs and gently peels open his eyes. "God, you're a beautiful sight to wake up to. Have I ever told you that?"

"Only every single morning since we've been home."

He smiles and grips my arm. "Come here." He pulls me on top of him.

I gasp as the towel falls around me. "I'm still wet."

His gaze becomes hooded as he takes in my naked body. "Not wet enough." He sits up, meeting me halfway in a kiss that sends my pulse racing.

Arms tighten around my waist while he thickens at my center. I rub myself against him, desperate for every inch of him to be buried deep inside me. "Your pants will be soaked."

My tone must give away how unconcerned I am for the fabric I want to remove because he chuckles and begins to take off his shirt.

"Maybe they'll dry by the time we're done." He tugs me to the side and lays me on my back before he stands to pull down his pants and briefs.

His cock is hard as he grips it in his fist and begins to stroke it nice and slow. I watch him with shallow breaths, my attraction for this man unrivaled. He was once a lonely man, almost shy, with a deep passion reserved for his camp. Now, he's no longer lonely, most definitely not shy, and his passion has primarily shifted to me.

He'll get no complaints from me, especially at times like this when he grips me by my ankles, pulls me to the edge of the bed so my ass is almost falling off, and plants his mouth between my thighs. He's like a hungry lion the way he pounces on me and takes me like he'd die without my taste on his lips. He's relentless in his pursuit as his fingers dig into the sides of my hips while he pulls me deeper into his mouth. His tongue fucks my center, dipping inside, and then flicking against my clit until he sucks me clean into his mouth.

"Holy fuck," I burst out, my eyes flying wide. My orgasm is building so fast that there's no warning when I explode against him and convulse against his face.

“That was so hot,” he growls before climbing back on top of me and pinning me down with a kiss. His hard length pushes against my entrance once, twice, until finally breaking through the barrier on the third try.

My head jerks back at the tightness as he fills me to the brink. Once his knees are digging into the bed, he pulls me onto his lap where our mouths join again. He’s in total control as he guides me up and down his cock, his tongue searching for mine while I fight off every little moan that breaks away from my chest.

My arms slide around his neck, and I start to lead, taking him faster and deeper with each rock of my hips. I don’t know how long we move like this—our hearts beating together as our bodies create a magical friction of love and desire—but with Anderson, I know what it feels like to be suspended in pure bliss.

Like now, when my climax captures me and I open my eyes to find Anderson right there too. We’re one—one breath, one heart, one body—and when one of us falls... we fall together.

His warm release fills me while mine rockets through my body. I cling to him like he’s my life raft in the deadliest storm, but not because I’m afraid. I’ve been through the worst of it and came out stronger in the end. Storms don’t scare me anymore. It doesn’t matter what Anderson and I are facing—we’ve made a pledge to do it together. So as our mouths connect and we swallow each other’s moans, I’m keeping my promise. A promise I made from the beginning.

“No regrets,” I whisper against his mouth.
He smiles. “No regrets.”



* * *

Anderson’s palm is sweaty in mine as we walk along the path toward the south side of camp. About a dozen guests are strolling in from the parking

lot, but I can see the worried look in his eyes. “No one is going to come,” he says, dread weighing heavily in his voice.

I squeeze his hand. “Stop it. You don’t know that.”

“Anderson! Hope!” Silver rushes up to us, her bright gray eyes practically glowing under the night lights. “You’ll never believe this.” She pulls out her phone and taps on the security monitoring app then hands the phone to Anderson.

Our gasps come at the same time when I watch as the camera picks up a long line of cars currently stopped at the gate. “They’re coming to the party?” My words are nearly breathless from my shock.

Silver laughs. “Yes. Security had to stop them at the gate so I could get someone to help with parking. Looks like we’re going to have a full house tonight.”

I squeal and leap into her arms, hugging my best friend as tightly as I can. “That’s the best news ever.”

“Oh, that’s not the last of my news,” Silver says with a laugh as I disconnect my octopus arms from her. “Though I’m not so sure how you’re going to take this one, Anderson.”

She makes a cringe face, and my heart plunges into my toes. I can tell by the sparkle in her eyes that whatever bad news is about to come is something she finds more humorous than anything.

Anderson frowns. “Geez, just rip the bandage off. I can’t take any more surprises.”

Silver bites down on her lip and nods toward the parking lot where a man with a backward cap, shredded jeans, a plaid green shirt, and the moodiest expression I’ve ever seen is strutting toward us with a large leather bag slung over his shoulder.

“Holy shit.” Anderson’s mouth practically drops to the ground.

Before I question anything, the man’s eyes land on Anderson, and he stops dead in his tracks then drops his bag at his feet. The man extends his arms and raises his brows. “Guess who’s back, bitches?”

I look up at Anderson, who has composed himself somewhat, and ask, “Is that who I think it is?”

Anderson nods, his eyes never shifting from the man with the dangerous gleam in his eyes. “The one and only Benson Bexley, in the flesh. And he still looks like a pile of trouble.”

I cover my mouth with my hand to stifle my laugh. “Sounds like life at

Camp Bexley is about to get interesting.”



* * *

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* * *

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Over the Moon



PROLOGUE

Steam from my shower envelops me as blood washes off my skin and circles the drain. I'm not sure how long I stand there and watch the crimson swirl like an endless ball of unraveling string. I'm not even certain how much, if any, of the blood belongs to me. While my skin is welted and bruised and a permanent knot continues to tighten in my gut, I don't see or feel a single open wound on my body.

The desperate need to scream claws up my throat, and tears prick the backs of my eyes as they threaten to burst all over again. The anger comes in waves, pushing me toward the riptide, no matter how hard or fast I fight to swim away. It's the darkest battle I've ever faced, yet somehow, I know it's only the beginning.

When the red finally fades, I tear my eyes from the drain and shut off the water. I reach for a folded towel, and my injured arm screams in pain at the simple motion. Still, I manage to get the stiff fabric around my body before daring a look into the mirror. Fog over the glass blocks my view, but that doesn't matter. I can still feel the map of scars that cover my body.

Seventy-two hours have passed since I ran away. It's been bus stop after bus stop, evidence of my injuries cloaked under a big gray hoodie and baggy sweatpants. Now, I need to figure out my next move. While leaving was always the plan, I didn't expect it to go down like that. Still, running away from home was easy. Settling into somewhere new... That will be the challenging part.

After easing my aching body into a fresh set of clothes, I open the bathroom door and am instantly blasted with icy-cool air and a brightly lit hotel room. I'm alone, and everything is where I left it, save for the manila envelope that's currently sliding through the crack at the bottom of the hotel door. I hurry over to the envelope and stuff it inside my duffel bag—there's no need to look inside since I already know what it contains. I lift my bag over my shoulder, wincing through the pain, then head for the door, stopping only long enough to catch a glance at myself in the long mirror.

The girl staring back at me isn't the same one that walked into this hotel room hours ago. Not a stitch of makeup appears on her face. Her once-brown long locks are now blond and frame her chin with a sloppy cut job. The clothes that hang from her scarily thin frame consist of nothing more than

light jeans and a long T-shirt. The change is simple, yet I'm unrecognizable even to myself.

While this girl has been stripped down to the barest bones of herself, her soul shattered, her heart broken a million times over, at least she's finally free.

CHAPTER ONE

Football. Playing in the NFL has always been my number one goal. My final destination. The be all, end all of my life. It's also the one thing I've always been able to control. My blessing when everything else around me seems cursed.

Or maybe it's me who is cursed. At least, it feels like I am at the moment. My head aches, I'm stiff from sleeping all wrong, and I can't for the life of me peel my eyelids apart to see where I am.

A door slams in the distance, and the fog that clouds my memory of the night before begins to clear. Images slowly filter through the haze, my grin growing with each visual of my night at one of my favorite bars in downtown Seattle.

Long red hair wrapped around my fist. A fair, freckled cheek pressed into the bathroom sink counter. Skirt pulled up around a trim waist. Me, pumping into the beautiful stranger from behind.

I'm not surprised I don't remember the woman's name. What does surprise me is the memory that pummels me next.

A bathroom door bursting open. A furious bouncer planting his body at the entrance. My head hitting tile as I'm thrown against a bathroom stall. A fist connecting with my jaw.

Then...

My grin fades, and an ugly pit grows in my gut. *Shit*. I look around to find myself in a loaded jail cell with a dozen others. The aftermath of my bad decisions slams me in the chest. The woman who'd lured me into the bathroom without an ounce of resistance from me was the bouncer's wife. Apparently, he doesn't like to share. After he tossed me to the curb outside the club, I was arrested for public intoxication. Now, here I am. My home away from home. It's only a matter of time before one of my teammates I was with last night bails me out of this shithole.

Just then, the familiar sound of steel sliding across a track gets my attention before the sound of my name does. "Kingston Scott, you're free to go."

A laugh muddled with relief shakes through me. I stand from the bench, taking one sweeping glance around the cell, and the corners of my mouth curl back into a smile. "See ya later, suckers."

Angry curse words of my cellmates fly at me as I strut toward the exit, completely unfazed. Another night in the drunk tank isn't going to be enough to alter my future. The memory of last night will be gone before I even step foot outside this place. I'm confident in that knowledge... until I spot Coach Reynolds standing at the counter with a look on his face that no fellow Seattle football player wants to see.

Disappointment.

Most other men on the team would grovel in shame at his feet, but not me. After three years playing football under the man, I know he has a soft spot for thugs like me. There has always been a silent understanding between us. I help him win football games, and he stays off my back when it comes to my personal life. But I can't help but wonder if this time is different. While I know he isn't blind to my previous misdemeanors, he's never been the one to bail me out of one. And by the look on his face as he waits for me to collect my belongings, he sure as hell doesn't look like someone who wants to do me any favors.

"Nance rat me out?" I practically spit my sour words while tearing my eyes from Coach and pushing toward the exit. "Or was it Balko? That son of a bitch." I shake my head, fuming at their betrayal. Nance, Balko, and I have always been like the three amigos, bailing each other out of whatever shit we stir up for ourselves. Apparently, whatever loyalty I thought we had died somewhere between my bathroom romp and my night behind bars.

"Does it matter?" Coach quirks a brow as his dry tone grates against my ego. "You're free to walk. Your record is clean. You get another chance to fuck it all up. Congratulations, Kingston."

Instinct kicks in, and I want to gloat. That growing pit in my stomach has already shrunk back down to nothing, and a rush of adrenaline takes its place at the thought of avoiding yet another lawful consequence for my actions.

"Are you smiling?"

Coach's enraged voice breaks through my thoughts, and my lips flatten back down as I meet his deadly gaze. I swallow my glee as he slams a hand against the glass door and swings it open, allowing me to walk out first.

I step outside, squinting and raising a hand to shield my eyes from the sun. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Noon."

I detect annoyance in his tone, and I flip him a gaze and quirk a brow. "It was just past midnight when they threw me in here. You're just getting me

now?”

“Yeah, I know. Shitty of me, right?” Coach glares. “Figured I’d let you sleep it off first.” He jabs a finger toward his shiny red Range Rover. “Get in.”

Balko drove last night, but my guess is Coach already knows that since he’s headed in the direction of my home. That asshole was probably the one who ratted me out. Annoyance stirs through me. Payback will be a bitch.

I try to ignore Coach’s cool silent treatment as he drives us through the city streets toward the 520 bridge. I know the man well enough to understand just how serious his silence is. This isn’t an after-the-game-we-lost kind of fury where he rips us a new one in the locker room. This isn’t a screaming match on the football field when we run a drill that fails to match his expectations. This could mean something much, much worse.

I shift away as if the physical movement will erase my thoughts. Facing the outdoors, I roll down the window to feel the wind smack my face, providing alertness I should have felt last night before it all went sideways. I seem to always find myself in this dark place. Not *here*, physically, not even with Coach. He rarely interferes with his players’ behavior off the field. But that doesn’t erase my list of bad decisions. They’re stacking up so high that I can’t even see over the top anymore. Something tells me this last stunt might just be the one that makes the whole stack topple over.

Guilt isn’t something I feel often, but I feel a pang of it now. Why should I feel guilty when I’ve only ever been trying to survive? I came from nothing and was practically raised by wolves, and I overcame it all to lead a life most others would die to have. Sure, I go off the rails sometimes, but that has nothing to do with my game. I shake my head, clearing the guilt and replacing it with my most lethal weapon. Determination.

“Tell me something, Kingston. Why do you want to play ball?”

I’m so focused on my own thoughts that I almost miss Coach’s question. When I register what he asked, I turn to face him, my brows knitting in the center. “Same as everyone on the team. I love the game. And I’m the best at what I do. I’ve worked damn hard to get here.”

Coach nods. “No one can argue any of those things. But *why* did you work so hard to get here? I want to know what drives you.”

For some reason, his question throws me off guard. I stumble over my thoughts for a few seconds, coming up empty by the time Coach speaks again.

“C’mon, King. It’s not a hard question. Is it the money? Is it the celebrity status? Is it the women? Pick one.”

My gut reaction is to tell Coach that none of those answers are my reason, but any answer I spit out will be a lie. The truth is, I’ve never had to think that hard about it before. I just *know* I love football. Isn’t that enough?

“I don’t know what to tell you, Coach. You’re asking me this for a reason, and I’m not sure I can give you the answer you want to hear. I play ball because I’m good at it. It’s the only thing I’ve ever been good at. The adrenaline rush is a great feeling, the money is spectacular, and the women are a sweet bonus, but I’m not sure any of that is what drove me to start playing the game.”

Coach nods again. “Figured as much.”

That’s all he says until he parks in the driveway of my Lake Washington home. An awkward silence follows as my hand slowly reaches for the door handle. I’ve never been one for formalities, and the tension billowing through the air only makes me want to exit the vehicle as fast as possible. Before I can make a move to exit, the engine shuts off completely.

Shit.

Coach shifts, turning to face me. “I think it’s time you figured out why you want to play ball.”

After getting my drunk ass kicked and getting thrown in jail, I thought the last thing Coach would be concerned about was my desire to play football. “Um, sure. Okay.” I don’t know what else to say.

Coach rolls his eyes and settles his stern gaze back on me. “Let me say it this way. I will never again do what I did for you today. Do you understand me? It’s not my job to bail you out of jail. Nor is it my job to take advantage of my connections to clear you of your misdemeanor. While the crime may be minor, the publicity you managed to avoid should be considered yet another blessing in your life. If you’re not careful, you’re going to run out of those blessings, Kingston. No one will be there to clean up after your messes, and you won’t have a home on the field to come back to.”

Something twists inside me as anger and fear swarm my mind. “It will never happen again, Coach. I swear to you.” I shake my head, feeling suddenly desperate to forget the events of last night.

Coach nods. “I believe that you mean that. I also expect that you can understand that I’ll need to take some steps into ensuring the reputation of our team. We start practices in a little over a month, and I hope you can be

there with us.”

I hope you can be there with us. Never have words haunted me so much. Heat blasts my chest while I temper my tone. “What does that mean?”

“What do you think it means?” he fires back.

There’s a fiery ball in my chest that threatens to explode. The only way I know how to diffuse it is to walk away, but I can’t walk away from this. This is my life. My livelihood. The only fucking thing in my life that has ever felt right. Still, I want to do anything but continue this conversation. Suddenly, the only thing I love in this life feels threatened, and no amount of confidence I have in my career can help me. I’ve never felt the weight of my future so heavy on my shoulders.

“I don’t know, Coach. I fucked up last night. What’s new? But what does it matter? Last night has nothing to do with football.”

“Last night has everything to do with football, King. That’s where you seem to be lost, and it’s time we set things straight.”

Coach doesn’t have to yell for me to feel his wrath. It’s a smack in the face, and I hear him loud and clear. “What do you want from me? Some kind of agreement that I won’t fuck up again? I’ll do it if that’s what you want.”

Coach tilts his head. “I had a different idea. Well, it’s Zach’s idea, actually.”

I frown as confusion makes its way through me. Zachary Ryan is Seattle’s team captain, and he’s extremely close with Coach. I guess it shouldn’t surprise me that they talked, but the question slips past my lips anyway. “Zach knows about this?”

“He does, and I’m going to leave you in his hands with what comes next.”

“Huh?” My eyes dart between his. “What comes next?”

“You’ll find out tomorrow at five a.m. when Zach picks you up. Just have a duffel packed with some stuff to hold you over for a while. Workout gear, mostly.”

“A while? How long is that, exactly?”

“Not sure yet. Let’s start with one month and see how it goes from there.”

My jaw drops with so much force, I can feel the stretch that comes with my shock. “One month? But, Coach—”

“I trust you’ll make it work without complaint. Just be ready to go.”

My mouth snaps shut as I try to make sense of what’s happening, but I can’t for the life of me come to any positive conclusions. “Okay.” I draw the

word out slowly before Coach nods for me to exit his vehicle.

“Five a.m. tomorrow,” Coach repeats through his open window as he’s backing out of my driveway. “We’ll talk again when you get back.”

He drives off without another glance, leaving me standing in the wake of my bad decisions. Whatever Coach and Zach have planned, I have a feeling I’m about to pay.

CHAPTER TWO

“They’re almost here.” My coworker, Hope, practically squeals the words as she charges into my office.

I look up from the stack of immunization records I was reviewing to find my friend’s normally light skin flushed and her brown eyes big and bright. Smiling, I press my hands on my desk and tilt my head in amusement. “*They?* The campers don’t arrive until Monday.”

She lets out a laugh and plants herself in the nearest chair. “No, not them. The Seattle players and that creative agency who host this whole thing. They like to come in a few days early for the initial setup, remember?”

I really should remember, seeing as this will be the third year the team has held their football camp at Camp Dakota. What started out as a one-week anti-bullying fundraising event quickly grew thanks to its popularity. For one month, Camp Dakota, along with BelleCurve Creative and the Seattle football team, hosts a month-long camp. Each week, we welcome new groups of kids and Seattle players. At the end of each week, there’s a scrimmage tournament to crown a team winner during the final ceremony.

“I guess I forgot. We see new groups every week. How do you expect me to remember a silly football event?”

Hope lets out an audible groan at my silence. “Seriously, Silver. How long have you lived here now?”

“At camp or in Washington?”

“Both.”

I ease back into my chair and take my time to respond, choosing my words carefully. Hope has only worked at Camp Dakota for the past year, and while she’s quickly become my best friend, there’s still a lot she doesn’t know about me. “Eight years.”

Something swirls in my gut at my mention of the length of time I’ve lived here, but I shove it aside quickly.

“Well,” Hope says, not missing a beat. “Then there’s no excuse. You should be a crazed Seattle fan like the rest of us by now.”

I avert my eyes and begin to clean up the paperwork spread over my desk. “Not going to happen. I’ve never been into sports.”

“What? Why?”

I shrug. “It’s just not my thing. But give me a sprained arm to sling or an

open cut to clean, and I'm your gal." Hope studies me in a way that makes me laugh with unease, causing me to narrow my gaze. "What?"

She lets out a heavy sigh. "Sometimes I just want to shake you. You need to live a little. Step outside of your comfort zone. Experience new things."

Laughing, I shake my head. "I'm doing just fine, trust me."

"Maybe, but you're so career minded, it scares me."

With a big dramatic roll of my eyes, I sigh. That's the thing about studying medicine—no one outside of the field could possibly understand. "There's nothing to be afraid of. And there's nothing wrong with being focused on my career. I didn't get an advanced nursing degree for nothing. I've worked really hard to get the head nurse position here after studying under Miriam Bexley for four years. I want to do her proud. I want to do the Bexleys proud."

The Bexleys have successfully owned and run Camp Dakota for two decades. I owe them everything for offering me a job and home when I came to them with zero experience. But I'm not about to get into all of that with Hope right now. "Anyway," I say, tilting my head. "Why are we talking about this? Because I don't care for football?"

Hope lets out a groan. "No, because you aren't freaking ecstatic that some of the hottest men on the planet are about to step foot in our camp. Aren't you at least a little bit curious about them?"

"No need to be curious." I pick up one of the closed envelopes on my desk and hold it up. "I'm already up to speed on all of their medical records. Twelve Seattle players are coming this week, and trust me, there's more information in this folder than you could ever find on their trading cards."

Hope's mouth falls open, and she lurches toward my desk, reaching for the envelope.

I yank it out of reach. "Oh no," I say with a grin. "That's confidential."

She lets out a frustrated scream. "You're such a tease. I'm so jealous. You know who's coming this week. You know everything about them." Her eyes widen. "Just imagine if one of them gets hurt." She looks up at the ceiling and sighs. "You'll get to tend to their wounds." Her gaze lands back on mine before a blush spreads across her cheeks. "Maybe you should teach me CPR. Just in case."

A laugh bursts past my lips, and I stand. "You're ridiculous. These forms are just a formality, but they're of no use to me. They're bringing in a sports physician from Orcas Island Hospital to help me with the kids, but the

professional players will just be here to coach. I never see them in my office.”

I can practically hear the excitement deflating from Hope’s chest. “Well, damn. I probably won’t see them much, either, since I’m not working any of the field activities.”

Hope is the activities director who’s usually put in charge of team-building activities during events like this. Her disappointment hits my chest with a pang. From the moment I met her, I knew she had a huge heart. “Well, you never know. Maybe you can strut by the field every so often and lock eyes with one of these hotties. Maybe you’ll score a date.” I raise my brows and wiggle them to get her to laugh.

“Or maybe we can double.” She waggles her brows back at me, this time causing me to break out in a smile of my own.

“Sorry. You’re on your own there. I don’t date the guests.”

She folds her arms across her chest and studies me. “Yeah, yeah, I know your rules, but you’re telling me you wouldn’t for a single minute consider one of these gorgeous men, even for a little fling?”

“And what would the point in that be? Most of them will be gone in a week.”

Her lids widen as she stares back at me like I’m insane. “Sex, Silver. The point is sex. It’s possible to have fun with a man you don’t intend to marry, especially when you’re not currently having sex at all.”

“Geez, you act like I’m some kind of prude. Tim and I broke up a month ago.”

She gives a dismissive wave of her hand. “He doesn’t count. His dick was probably as small as that tiny pea brain of his. I’m so glad Miriam fired his ass after what he did to you.”

I shrug. “It’s fine. I figured out soon enough he wasn’t the one.”

Hope tilts her head. “Because you, my friend, do not have a tiny pea brain. Your brain, in fact, is too big for your body, and it’s time to give it the day off.” She holds out a hand. “Come with me?”

“What?” I laugh. “To where?”

“To greet the bus, like we always do.”

I burst out with a laugh. “When do we ever greet the chaperones?” I shake my head, not giving her a chance to argue. “I don’t have time for this right now. There are kids who still need to turn in their immunization records. I need to make some phone calls to their parents, and...”

The look she gives me next cuts me. “Silver,” she says sternly.

“Hope,” I say right back.

She sighs. “I won’t take no for an answer.”

I give the girl credit. Out of all the years I’ve lived at the camp, no one has ever pushed me the way Hope has. While I try to resist her charms at every turn, I can admit that her adventurous nature has rubbed off on me a little bit.

I cringe while leaning my head back in frustration. “Geez. Okay, fine. I’ll go just so you won’t hold it over my head.”

“Smart girl.” She grins and hops to her feet. “I’ll meet you out front.”

After taking a minute to tidy up, I close and lock my office door. Then I cross the examination room toward the main entrance of the cabin. It’s a small workspace, but it’s perfectly fitting for my needs. The former head nurse, Miriam, whom I assisted, always kept me in the front room. I would greet kids and evaluate injuries, then she would come in to give the final assessment—both for me and the patients. She was always testing me, critiquing my performance, and adding to my training. The day she finally retired and left camp, it felt like someone pulling a crutch away from me. But it only took a few months to realize I could, in fact, walk on my own.

“Morning, ladies,” Anderson Bexley calls out as he strolls by my office, probably on his way to greet our guests.

“Morning, Anderson,” Hope and I chime back in unison.

Detecting the flirtatious tone in Hope’s voice, I snap my head to her and narrow my eyes. “Obvious much?”

She shrugs, looking slightly annoyed, while her eyes are pinned on the man increasing his distance from us. “Doesn’t matter. Anderson doesn’t even see me.”

Unfortunately, I know all too well that her feelings are justified. Anderson is just as career minded as me. We’ve always had that in common.

“Yeah, well, if it makes you feel better, I know he’s overwhelmed right now. He’s taken on a lot for his parents while his siblings are off living their lives around the world. Sometimes, I wonder if he feels stuck.”

She quirks a brow at me. “Like you? Geez, you two would be perfect together.”

I make a face. “Gross, no. Anderson is practically my brother. And I’m not stuck here. I *choose* to be here. There’s a big difference.”

The moment the words are out of my mouth, I regret saying them. I don’t have to look at my friend to see the gears of curiosity churning in her brain.

“Why *do* you choose to be here, Silver? I mean—don’t get me wrong. I don’t know what I would do without you. But it’s not like you have family tying you here. You could be a nurse anywhere. And you’d probably get paid a hell of a lot more than the Bexleys pay you. Why Camp Dakota?”

I pinch out a smile, trying to ignore the discomfort snaking through me. I could tell her that the Bexleys have done a lot for me, and that if not for them, I might not ever have gone into nursing, but that would only lead to more questions. I’ve learned the hard way that it’s much safer for all involved to just keep it simple. “I like it here.” A shrug accompanies my smile, and it works.

While Hope turns away with frustration evident on her face, she doesn’t ask another question about it. We follow the winding dirt path lined with tall pine trees until we come to the large clearing, where the staff is awaiting the players’ bus. I can’t help but notice the undeniable energy swirling in the air. The staff’s voices are more animated than normal. Their footsteps quicker. Their laughter louder.

One would think after the previous two years of the same event, the staff would be used to seeing the players, but the fanfare speaks for itself. And this is where I don’t fit in with the others. As I stand here, awaiting a busload of athletes I won’t even be working with, I start to get antsy. There are so many other things I could be doing right now, like inventory of my supplies or reviewing internship candidates. Miriam has been retired for a few months now, and the only assistant I’ve ever had recently quit to pursue other careers, which means I’m on my own until I find a fitting replacement.

I start to tell Hope I’m going to head back to work, then the sound of an approaching engine riles up the crowd. A second later, a giant motor coach painted in purple and gold, along with the Seattle football team’s logo, drives through the gated entrance.

The chatter only intensifies, fading to a slight buzz only once the bus is parked and they’re all trying to contain their excitement. While I’m not a giant fan of the team like the rest of them, I wholeheartedly understand their elation. Living here can become monotonous at times, so I understand how the arrival of celebrities tends to wind them up.

One by one, players step off the bus, large purple duffel bags slung over their broad shoulders. They look almost silly, like Hulk clones all huddled together as Anderson makes his way toward them with his always-present clipboard.

“C’mon,” Hope hisses. “Let’s get closer. I want to see if I can touch one of them.”

I throw her a horrified glance as she starts to walk off. In a swift move, I clutch the back of her shirt and pull her back to me with a laugh. “Please don’t be like *that*.” I nod toward the gaggle of camp counselors who didn’t bother to change out of their swimsuits for the occasion.

“Ugh,” Hope says with disgust. “Do they always have to be so flaunty about their hotness?”

I raise a brow. “Did you just say ‘flaunty’?”

She shrugs. “I did, and I’m not taking it back.”

Laughing, I give my friend a little nudge. “Play it cool. Trust me. Any guy worth dating won’t fall for that, anyway. They’ll fall for your hotness exactly as you stand.”

Hope frowns and stares down at her work uniform, which is just a pair of khaki shorts and a white polo with Camp Dakota embroidered into it. “Yeah, but no one will be able to see my hotness under this frock.”

“Just wait until they see you in your cafeteria uniform.”

Absolute horror registers on Hope’s face as she takes in my words. Most of the regular staffers get called to take up odd jobs as needed, and Hope absolutely despises the cafeteria duties. I’ve never seen my friend look so mortified. “Seriously, Silver? You are the worst.”

She turns back to the group of guys while trying to stifle a laugh, but even while suffering from wardrobe insecurities, she’s filled to the brim with good humor.

“Holy shit.” The curse flies from Hope’s mouth so fast, I barely have time to register it before she’s gripping my arm. “No way.”

I follow her gaze and squint to see a straggler stepping off the bus. He’s tall and seemingly built like the rest, but I can’t see much beneath the black hoodie that’s pulled over his head and the dark shades that hide his eyes.

The way Hope’s jaw has practically fallen to the asphalt makes me all the more curious. “I don’t understand. Why are you freaking out?”

“Is that King?” she asks, her eyes wide. “It can’t be. There’s no way he would be caught dead here.”

I have no idea whom she’s referring to. “Why not?”

“Because he’s...” Her stare follows the man’s movements.

Her elaboration doesn’t help me make sense of her freak-out, not in the least. “Because he’s what, Hope?”

“Because he’s Kingston freaking Scott. The *king* of all defensive ends. A god-like masterpiece of epic proportions. Just look at him.”

Squinting, I try my best to see more of the guy who now looks like he’s in a heated argument with another player. I twist my lips, focusing back on the heated one. “He looks...” I try to find something positive to say. “Very...” And I’m coming up empty. “Grumpy.” When her eyes bulge at me, I jump to my own defense. “I can’t even see him. He’s all covered up.”

My nonchalance makes her wince. “I’m starting to question our entire friendship.”

“Over my attraction to a *sweatshirt*?”

She lets out a laugh. “Okay, I get it. But c’mon. You’re telling me you took one glance at Kingston’s file and didn’t feel an ounce of anything?”

I give her question some serious thought, reviewing his name over and over in my mind until something clicks. *Kingston Scott. Kingston Scott. Kingston Scott.* But nothing connects. For the life of me, I can’t remember ever seeing the guy’s name in the records I’ve reviewed. “I know nothing,” I tell her honestly. “Must have skipped over him on accident.”

Hope rolls her eyes while laughing. “Only you, Silver. Only you.”

Grinning at my friend, I squeeze her arm. “I’m heading back to work now.” When she starts to argue, I narrow my eyes, signaling that I’m not taking no for an answer again. “See you at dinner.”

This time, she doesn’t argue. “Okay, fine. You get back to work. I’m going to find us a couple of guys to get to know better.” She winks, effectively causing my chest to heat with embarrassment.

I don’t doubt that she will.



* * *

I make my way to the empty staff room in the main lodge and pour myself a cup of coffee. The room is quiet save for the television that someone left on.

The Bexleys strictly enforce the no electronics rule around camp with this one television as our exception.

There's a cooking show playing now, and I smile when I recognize it as one I've watched with Hope before. *Desmond's Kitchen* is an adorable reality-slash-cooking show that features the owner of a cooking school in Seattle alongside his girlfriend, Maggie.

I find the remote and aim to turn it off when I'm caught in what's playing out on screen. Desmond is creeping up behind Maggie, who is cutting strips of dough to make pasta. She's so focused on her task that she doesn't see Desmond kneel behind her until he places a hand on her hip.

She looks over her shoulder, and then her eyes pan down. The moment she sees him, her face morphs from confusion to shock to excitement as she registers what's happening. The volume is too low for me to hear his words, but it's enough to make her fall to her knees and tell him, "Yes!"

A bundle of emotions heat in my chest and behind my eyes, until I'm fighting back tears from the proposal playing out on the screen. It's such a beautiful moment, a sweet and thoughtful gesture, but it also makes me sad to know it's something that may never happen for me.

After taking a moment to collect myself, I grab a muffin leftover from breakfast and head to my office. I start to think about Hope and her reaction to the NFL players who arrived. It's a mystery to me how she can be so content with having a meaningless fling with a guy who will be in and out of her life within the week. Then will she do the same thing next week, when a fresh set of guys come through? She could get attached to one of them—or worse, her heart could get broken.

A pang hits my chest at the thought of seeing my friend hurt. Working at a camp makes it impossible to avoid witnessing heartbreak. It's a frequent occurrence with the coed teen crowds. If it's not a boy not noticing them, then it's a boy who cheated or a boy who was only using them for one thing. Sure, sometimes it was the girls doing the hurting, but it's a rare occurrence that a boy comes to me looking for the cure to a broken heart.

I'm still thinking about Hope when I round the corner of my office and spot Anderson chatting with the giant, angry man. Strange that I don't remember him from the roster they sent to me.

"Silver," Anderson says when he spots me, "I want to introduce you to Kingston Scott. He was a last-minute addition for this week, so I'm just getting him squared away."

Kingston is still covered up with his dark shades and hoodie like he's afraid of the sun, but the little I see is enough to send chills rippling through my body.

I step forward to close the distance between us, knowing it's my turn to say something, but finding words has never felt so difficult. From afar, it was apparent that Kingston is a tall dude, but now I'm realizing just how tall. He towers over me by more than a foot. Given the fact that Anderson is six-three and still a few inches shorter than Kingston has me doing a quick calculation in my head.

There's a sliver of light brown peeking out from under his hoodie and unshaven stubble on his cheeks. His mouth is pressed into a hard line, telling me he isn't exactly thrilled to be here. Everything about the man is such a stark contrast to his teammates who hopped off the bus and greeted the staff with nothing but smiles.

"Welcome to Camp Dakota, Kingston," I say, somehow managing to steady my voice. "I'm sure you'll enjoy your time here." Thank God Hope isn't with us now. She would laugh in my face at my formality.

"Silver is our resident nurse," Anderson adds. "She'll be working closely with the sports physician once he arrives on Monday. Until then, she's your girl for any of your medical needs."

Kingston's brows lift above the top of his shades for a second before he reaches a hand out to me. My gaze falls to the hand he's just offered, and I hope he can't hear the way my heart is currently crashing against my ribs. While I know nothing about football, I imagine the hand he reaches out for me to take was born to hold one. "Nice to meet you, Silver."

Holy Jesus. Kingston's voice is like a baritone horn freshly dipped in honey, its tone still buzzing through the air long after its last note ended. I search his shaded gaze, knowing I should probably speak, but I'm coming up empty.

What the hell is wrong with me?

A throat clears from beside us, and I snap my head to find Anderson peering at me inquisitively. "Silver, do you mind getting him caught up on any medical release forms you'll need prior to Monday?"

"Sure thing," I manage to say, still reeling from being caught off guard, then I tilt my head, confused. "Wait. You mean right now?" I'm so flustered, I can feel my cheeks blazing.

Anderson narrows his eyes at me. "Unless you were in the middle of

something?”

I give a quick shake of my head. “No, of course not. I have time now.”

“Great. Make sure to show him to his cabin when you’re done.” Anderson backs away with a parting smile to Kingston. “Silver will be sure to take care of all your needs.” He claps the man on the back before jogging off and shouting back at him, “You’re in good hands.”

“Is that right?” Kingston’s voice is just low enough for me to hear, that same rhythmic buzz from before.

His eyes lock on mine, unleashing a flock of flutters inside of me. I don’t know why, but just standing in his presence is enough to make me angry. There’s just something about him that tells me he’s going to be trouble.

“Well then, Nurse Silver.” The side of his mouth tilts up in a cocky smirk before he opens his mouth again. “I look forward to seeing just how good those hands of yours are.”



* * *

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Lex was athleticism and grace, precision and passion, and she had a stage presence Theo couldn't tear my eyes from. He wanted her...on his team, in his bed. There was only one problem... He couldn't have both.

Falling From Gravity (Gravity, #1.5)

Amelia was nothing like Tobias had expected. Even after all the years—of living so close to her, of listening to her giggle with his sister in the bedroom next to his—he hadn't given much thought to his sister's best friend, until a secret spring break trip to Big Sur changed everything.

Defying Gravity (Gravity, #2)

The ball is in Amelia's court, but Tobias isn't below stealing—her power, her resolve, her heart. When he wants a second chance to reignite their connection, the answer is simple. They can't. Not unless they defy the rules their dreams were built on and risk everything.

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Acknowledgments

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Thank you XOXO,
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About K.K. Allen



K.K. Allen is a *USA Today* bestselling and award-winning author who writes heartfelt and inspirational contemporary romance stories. K.K. is a native Hawaiian who graduated from the University of Washington with an Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences degree and currently resides in central Florida with her ridiculously handsome little dude who owns her heart.

K.K.'s publishing journey began in June 2014 with a young adult contemporary fantasy trilogy. In 2016, she published her first contemporary romance, *Up in the Treehouse*, which went on to win the Romantic Times 2016 Reviewers' Choice Award for Best New Adult Book of the Year.

With K.K.'s love for inspirational and coming of age stories involving heartfelt narratives and honest emotions, you can be assured to always be surprised by what K.K. releases next.