



WHAT  
TEARS US  
**DOWN**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A.M. WILSON

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BOOKS BY A. M. WILSON

Arrow Creek Series

Where We Meet Again  
When Morning Comes  
What Tears Us Down  
Where Our Turn Begins

The Revive Series

Unleashing Sin  
Redesigning Fate  
Resurrecting Her  
His Deliverance (A Novella)

Revive: The Series

Westbridge Series

Pitch Dark  
Broad Daylight

Standalone

Indisputable

*To anyone who's fallen into a hard situation.*

*Past, present, or future.*

*I see you.*

*This book is for you.*

## PLAYLIST

“If the World Was Ending” JP Saxe, Julia Michaels

“Wonder” Shawn Mendes

“If You Love Her” Forest Blakk

“Anyone” Justin Bieber

“What Love Is” Tom Gregory

“Glad You Exist” Dan + Shay

“Unhuman” Quinn Lewis

“Tell Her You Love Her” Echosmith feat. Mat Kearney

“ilym” John K, Rosie

“Already There” Jasmine Thompson

“Could Be Good” Kat Cunning

“Moon” Jonah Kagen

“Like That” JP Saxe

“Rivals” Marc Scibilia

“Off My Face” Justin Bieber

“Holy” Justin Bieber, Chance The Rapper

“Butterflies” MAX, Ali Gatie

[Listen On Spotify.](#)



## ABOUT THIS BOOK

**Rhett Senova could charm a woman out of her panties and in the next breath, thank her mother for dinner.**

*Smooth* doesn't even begin to cover his moves. But the hottest playboy in Arrow Creek wasn't always this way.

He had dreams of a one-woman future, and the cry of his firstborn brought him to tears.

He never thought his wife would cheat on him with her boss.

Each day is a feud over the dream home he had built for his ex and learning to raise his young son without the jaded lens now coloring his world.

Starting over in his thirties isn't on his agenda. Not now that he's raised impenetrable walls. His ex left the sour taste of infidelity in his mouth, and he's not sure he can trust anyone new.

That is until he meets a vision passing through town and nearly gets mauled by her she-demon dog.

Her sassy wit makes other women seem inadequate, along with those luscious curves and burgundy curls.

The fact she hides beneath her tough exterior that she might be in trouble sends up red flags he'd be smart not to ignore.

Using his charm to win over the pit bull is the easy part. The question is whether he wants to win over the guarded redhead too.

Rhett

TOMMY BLOWS RASPBERRIES, and his chubby arms wave as I send the toy car flying across the carpeted floor to the other side of the room.

“Gain!” His hands smack together. I catalog the pearly teeth peeking through his grin, knowing the next time I see him will bring changes. I ruffle the soft sandy hair atop his head.

“Sorry, bud. All done.” I soften my words with a mirroring smile and plant a loud smack on his cheek. The fit of baby giggles is music to my ears. What’s left of my heart beats solely for the little guy in this room. Without him, not much purpose remains.

I leave him where he sits to retrieve his pink Hot Wheels car, a color he picked that his mother refuses to let him have, and zoom it back in his direction. Another round of squeals floats through the room and chases away the ghosts.

While he’s occupied with the toy, I pack the remainder of our things in preparation for check-out. Nora will be here at twelve on the dot, prompt as always when it comes to spiting me with our son.

No matter. I refuse to let her gloat at my circumstances. She may win our current battle, but the fucking war will be mine. Let her see me leaving a hotel room after spending one

of my nights with Tommy. I'll do it with a smirk. Over my dead body will she see how deep her talons score and her poison infects.

I'll do whatever I can to keep her venom from touching our son.

Overnight bags slung over my shoulder, I snag the squirmy two-year-old beneath his armpits and toss him in the air.

“Ready?”

The soft pat of his baby hand on my cheek never fails to stutter my heart.

“Yah, Dah!”

As does the gentle baby voice with which he utters my name. His delayed speech concerned me that it had to do with my abrupt separation from his mother, but his doctor assured me that some children simply take their time. Rather than stress, I cherish every word out of his mouth because the next time I see him, he'll have added more.

Under the guise of blowing a raspberry on his neck, I inhale the last scent of my son to hold me over until next week. Knowing I can't do a damn thing to see him sooner unless I move back into the house occupied by his mother.

“Love you, little man.”

With him tight to my hip, I exit our hotel room. These last few moments together on our trek to his mother are the hardest. Sometimes, he cries at our hand-offs. Other times, he's oblivious. His unpredictable response makes schooling my own emotions difficult. I'm not too manly to shed a tear for my distressed son, regardless of what judgment Nora casts my way. His pain hurts me. The fact I'm not allowed to soothe him is like a dagger splitting my ribs. A lingering ache I deal with in week-long increments.

Phone to her ear, she prattles on the line with a sneer as soon as we step off the elevator. On par with every Sunday for the past six weeks, she acts as if this is a giant inconvenience. I'd like to remind her how inconvenient it was to catch her

riding her boss's cock. Not that she cares. Nora gives not that first fuck about anyone except herself and Tommy.

My lips connect with the side of Tommy's head while I'm still steps away from his mother, knowing from prior experience she'll take him the moment he's within reach.

"I love you. Be good for Mommy." My low voice ensnares Nora's crinkled-browed attention. She ends her call and drops her phone into her open purse. She probably assumes I'm encouraging him to be a terror. As if this loving guy could do wrong.

"It's twelve-oh-one." Her sneer only serves as a painful reminder that I once found her attractive. I want to crinkle my own brow as I rove over her face, noting the new lines she's going to use my money to fill with Botox.

As high school sweethearts, I wanted nothing more than to watch her age along my side, reveling in each new gray hair and line, laughing at the added ten, fifteen, twenty-five pounds as we lived a plentiful life.

It would seem money can't buy everything, love isn't all we need, and even a big dick can't keep a wandering woman like Nora satisfied.

Not to brag about what I'm packing.

Her strawberry-blond hair rests at the nape of her neck in a low ponytail, and a few loose tendrils frame her face. The spark in her dark brown eyes died years ago. Slim and put together, her body looks exactly as it did when we were sixteen. I can't deny her beauty. Though, it's a shame God doesn't strike down adulterers and steal their best assets. Not that I'm much different. Twelve months is all it took for me to go from a one-woman man to fucking my way through half the town.

We all deal with pain in our own way.

I don't respond to her antagonizing remark as I hand over our son. The whimper as she grasps him beneath his arms compresses my heart like a fist. Little chubby arms reach to

me, and I lock down every muscle in my body in order not to take him and flee the damn state.

“Same time next week.” The question sounds stated, leaving no room for arguments.

“You’ll still be at this hotel?”

My thighs burn. The need to move overwhelms me. “Yep.”

“You haven’t found your own place?” The disparaging mention scores across my heart.

Arms crossed over my chest, I lean in. The words hiss between clenched teeth. “Maybe if my bitch of wife didn’t fuck me over, steal my own house, and drain my accounts, I wouldn’t have to live in a fucking hotel.”

She rears back as if I slapped her, and her eyes dart around the pristine lobby. I wouldn’t put it past her to play the battered woman card. I would never lay a finger on her, but she’s shown me over the past year that she’s not above doing what she needs to get ahead. With that in mind, I drop the diaper bag at her feet and flick my shades over my eyes. She’s no longer privy to the pain she causes.

“One week.”

No response from her is powerful enough to stop me from strolling around her and out the circular door into the noon sunshine. I bleep the locks on my Jeep, toss my duffel in the back, and fire the engine.

Then I wait.

Nora strolls out five minutes later, bouncing my boy on her hip. She aims a smile at him. He’s undoubtedly the only person left on the planet to receive her genuine attention. I wait patiently for her to load him up and take off. Five more minutes pass in silence. My hand itches to turn the radio dial, but I force myself to sit. To feel. To become it before it becomes me.

The one and only rogue droplet splashes from the arch of my cheek to my jeans before I can swipe it away. With nobody around to hear it, I unshackle the bark of agony. The hounds of

hell scour the inside of my Jeep, feeding on my pain and begging for an encore.

A palm connects with my steering wheel, and my face contorts as I swipe the other through my hair. I hiss an excruciating breath. A year is a long fucking time to live on this precipice. The struggle she drags me through in order to wring everything from me. Taking my heart and dreams isn't enough. She won't stop until she has my home, my money, and my kid in her control.

The fight leaks from my fingertips first, feeling returns to the digits after a tingling existence. Back under control, I shift gears and exit the lot. The direction steers me to the outskirts of town, back to my temporary home.

After ten minutes of mindless driving, I arrive. Home sweet fucking home. I direct my Jeep to the edge, execute a three-point turn, and reverse into the farthest spot at the back. This position provides an uninhibited view of the expansive space. I remove my jumpstart generator from the glove box and plug in my phone in preparation for the night.

Either I'll find someone's bed to warm at Calypso's, the local watering hole, or I'll spend another night sleeping beneath the stars. Reminiscent of camping trips enjoyed during my childhood.

The former lost its appeal long ago, but I wouldn't have made it through winter without the option. Leaving my home in early March was piss-poor timing, but when Nora paraded the man she'd cheated on me with through my own fucking living room, I'd had enough.

A week into what I hoped was a temporary arrangement at the Arrow's Inn Hotel, my cards declined. Nora had opened new accounts and left mine drained. With nothing more than several hundred-dollar bills in my wallet, I wouldn't have lasted a week's stay. I'd already slept with a couple of women since I found my wife cheating, so what were a few more? In exchange for a sexual release, they provided me with a warm bed.

Nobody knows of my current status, and I'd like to keep it that way. My friends assume I'm nothing more than a playboy out on the prowl post a lengthy separation. Asking them for help isn't an option. Law helped me last year with building that fucking monster dream home Nora's kept in her clutches. With his own home construction underway, I can't force my way into his rambler when he and Cami are already cramped and busy.

And Nathan has a new baby, a new wife, and two houses to sell. Not to mention I once hooked up with his wife, Kiersten, prior to them getting together. The very definition of uncomfortable.

I'm not proud of the man I've become, but finding my high school sweetheart being plowed by her boss hit my ego with a fucking sledgehammer.

The assumption is always of young girls dreaming of the perfect family and the perfect life. Not here. I had the dreams. The perfect plan. Meeting Nora in high school initiated a chain reaction of hopes for my future.

Take over my grandfather's extermination business.

Get married.

Build our dream home.

Start a family.

I pictured my life with stark clarity from the day we traded in our V cards with one another. I was on the fast track of getting everything I wanted.

Until she ruined it without reason.

I glance from the black screen of my phone out the windshield in contemplation of what's next. Sleeping in my Jeep supplies me with too many moments to stew on the past. The flames of anger stoke constant red embers in wait of their moment to flame bright and burn.

Speaking of flames.

Two spaces over, a head of wavy hair the deepest shade of red I've ever seen emerges. Immediately after the bobbing

curls catch my attention, the rest of her materializes from beyond the driver's door of a ten-year-old white Lexus. I cup my jaw in contemplation of the rounded hourglass figure. One that comes straight from nature with a bit of food appreciation to give it the perfect softness. Pretty sure my tongue lolls out of my mouth like a caricature at the vision of high-waisted jeans and the crop top she's working.

Fuck. Me.

There's nothing sexier than a woman confident with her body. I don't care if she's a size two or twenty-two. And this woman, closer to the latter range, radiates her confidence.

As much as temptation encourages me to jump out and smooth talk my way into her car and her bed, I stay put and watch the vision cross the truck stop parking lot and enter the convenience store ahead.

I spent half my life being proud of the fact I'd only ever been with my wife. I wore the badge with honor, not wanting to be like all the other men.

At this moment, with my sights set on an absolute goddess? I can't be more glad that Nora fucked it all up.



Evie

THE AFTERNOON SUN blazes behind my rear window, casting an orangish glow across the dash. My open window gusts warm air in my face to help me remain awake, in addition to the air-conditioning on full blast.

Grittiness scratches my eyes after two days of straight driving. Tears long ago evaporated, but a red blotchiness encircles the drooping lids. If I don't pull over soon, I'll fall asleep and possibly crash into a ditch. Considering the recent turns in my life, that may not be the worst outcome.

A call rings through the dash, the name flashing on my radio screen, and I jab the button on the steering wheel.

"Hello?"

"Tell me where you are." The panicked voice of Eric, my brother, fills the confines of my car and incites a roar in my gut.

"You don't need to know."

"I don't like you out there alone."

I scoff. "I don't need you to rescue me."

"Evie." The pain in the utterance slices me wide open.

"You know this is my only option. I'm not moving across the ocean, and if I tell you, you'll just tell him again like last time."

“I’m so sorry.” The roar of wind nearly steals his apology, but I catch the tortured whisper.

I rid the tension through my exhale. “I know.” My fingers twist tight around the steering wheel as I come across the first town limit sign in what feels like hours.

*Arrow Creek 5mi*

“Look, I’m going to find a place in the next town. I’ll check in regularly, but don’t call. Please. Nothing you can do will make this better.” The plea fissures through my voice.

The blame lies with me, and I wish he’d stop trying to fix this. He doesn’t know the whole story.

“As long as you don’t make me worry, I’ll wait to hear from you.”

“It’ll be okay. I’ll figure this out.” I hope.

Falling in love with my brother’s best friend, Tate, was dangerous from the onset. I always knew the power tilted to his side. Letting him rip my heart out three years later was more devastating than I ever imagined, though I’ve had some time to recover since then.

We hang up a moment later, and I take the exit for the next town. The second official stop I’ve made during this getaway. The first was too close to home, and my brother’s big mouth led my ex straight for me. Not that it amounted to anything, but I don’t want to be found. I don’t want to become a charity case. Not when he was abundantly clear that he needs a clean break. I’ve crossed several states and half the continental United States to get far enough away.

I glance over to Ghost on my passenger seat and give her a gentle nudge to alert her. The white pittie startles and bobs her snout in the air a few times before pushing it into my hand.

“Bet you’re ready for a break, huh?” Her wet nose nudges me when I stop stroking. She’s not an official therapy dog, but the effect is the same. Petting her short fur brings an instant comfort unlike anything else.

Across an open field, a wide white sign of a truck stop and convenience store catches my eye. The parking lot has an abundance of light posts. As long as they turn on at night, it'll be well lit and as safe as anywhere else. With Ghost's presence and my Bowie knife in my driver's door compartment, I'm as equipped as I'll ever be for spending indefinite nights in my car.

I pull in near the back of the lot a couple of spaces away from another vehicle. There's nothing creepier than trying to sleep in a car with another next to it. I've also learned not to park in the farthest corner. The creeps and weirdos tend to emerge with the shadows.

"Be right back." I climb out into the late spring sun and wait for Ghost to lower her head back to the seat. Ignoring the feeling of eyes on my back, I cross the parking lot and enter the convenience store. A few snacks are in order for dinner and fresh water for Ghost. Tomorrow, I'll start the online search for clients and find a grocery store to stock up my ex's industrial-strength cooler that stays cold for days at a time. So what if I stole it in my haste to leave? I'm sure he can buy another. Or I'll tell Eric to buy him one for Christmas since they've remained friends.

Meandering down aisles lit by overhead fluorescent bulbs, I find a few cheap packs of beef jerky. Someone bumps into me from behind, steadying me with a hot palm between my shoulder blades.

"Sorry, darlin'."

I stiffen and slow spin on a heel. The yellowed grin from the man does nothing for the constriction of discomfort tightening around my spine. Eyes overcast by bushy black brows slowly peruse me, and that grin transforms into one of interest.

"New around here?"

My throat bobs on a dry swallow. "Passing through," I lie.

He takes a step back, nearly putting the entire width of the aisle between us. Both hands rise in surrender. "Relax. I'm

Dan. You seem a little lost.”

I shake the bag of jerky in my hand, unaware of the brand or flavor. “Nope. I have what I need.”

“If I can point you anywhere around town, give me a holler. I’m pretty familiar.” His hands slide into the pockets of his jeans.

“Thanks.” I angle my torso back to the snacks in hopes the hint is clear. A few seconds later, the squeak of his shoes on the linoleum tells me he’s walking away. The memory flitters off a moment later. After selecting two sticks of pepper jack cheese and three bottles of water, I find my way back to the front counter to check out.

The kind and frail cashier sends me a friendly smile that I reciprocate without pause. If I’ve learned anything about people as of late, it’s that I never know what someone may be going through. A simple smile is the least I can do when I don’t have much else to give.

“Have a nice day.” I load my arms with the items and push open the door with my back. A warm breeze gusts my long tresses, and a tendril sticks to the corner of my mouth. With a turn of my head, I wipe it against my shoulder and immediately spot Dan leaning against the brick exterior. A gray cloud floats from the cherry-red tip of the cigarette dangling from his dry, cracked lips. The grease-stained navy-blue button-down encasing his torso and paunch relays the image of a mechanic or a trucker. One who enjoys greasy double cheeseburgers and a case of beer, if I had to guess.

Not that I’m one to judge with my own soft exterior.

He directs a chin lift in my direction. “You sure you don’t need a friend, darlin’?” The butt of his smoke drops to the concrete, and he twists it beneath the toe of his shoe.

I straighten and thrust my chin skyward. “I’ve been polite. If I wanted your help, I’d seek it.”

His gaze rakes grossly down my figure. “I bet you would.” His disdainful mutter tosses out red flags.

Nothing is more difficult than turning your back on a creep, but it's my only option to escape. I have the stubbornness to stand in a staring match all day, but I promised Ghost a fresh drink and a bathroom break.

Wearing my confidence like a shield, I turn on a heel and march back across the parking lot.

"Fucking bitch," he mutters behind me, the wind carrying his words farther than he probably intended.

A sigh of relief breaks free when I'm steps away from my temporary home. I bleep the locks as I approach, eager for the sense of safety to wash over me.

I dab at the mist of sweat dotting my forehead and yank open my door.

"Hey."

The pleasing drawl and crunch of gravel capture my attention, but I've had enough of fending off weirdos for one day. A second one will be tolerated less than the first.

"What?" The one-eighty spin sends my fiery hair twirling around me.

Unprovoked by my attitude, the guy holds his hands up and rounds the hood of a black Jeep. With a flick of his eyes, he gestures to Dan. "He giving you trouble?"

The respectable distance he leaves between us lowers my guard a smidge. "It's fine." I turn back to my car, rouse Ghost with a scratch beneath her chin, and grab her popup water dish and special mat.

"Didn't look fine. Looked like he was making you uncomfortable."

Moving to my left, I place the mat on the ground and fill the dish at my feet. "You mean like you're doing right now?"

His automatic step forward puts him within punching distance. "I'm not—"

Sensing a threat, Ghost releases a low growl from her perch on my driver's seat.

“You might want to take a step back.”

He retreats a hasty step, hands still held in place, and speaks to me without tearing his eyes away from my dog. “Is he under your control?”

“Do you want to find out?” I fold my arms over my chest and bite my lip to withhold a smirk. Ghost is the biggest baby, but she doesn’t like threatening men in my space.

He inches back farther. “No, no, I do not.” Catching a rock, he stumbles a step and curses. “Fuck.”

Ghost’s growls increase.

“I don’t think she likes your language.”

“That thing is a she-demon?”

I lean against the side of my car in enjoyment. “I think now’s a good time to warn you I forgot her leash.”

His eyes snap to mine. The spark of fear is amusing, but the entire package of rich browns and long lashes hitch my breath. I decide to play nice.

Without losing eye contact, I reach into my car and tap her on the nose twice. Ghost hops down onto the special mat and gives an exaggerated stretch. Her tail nubbin wiggles excitedly with her booty, and she trots to her water dish.

The exaggerated scrape of gravel reveals the man moved back another step, and I chuckle beneath my breath as I prepare her food.

I drop the second bowl next to the first, attach her lead, and straighten. Dusting my hands on my hips, I find the man leaning against his own vehicle with his attention pinned on my dog.

“You’re fucking with me.”

I extend the hand loosely holding her leash. “You want to test that?” A shake of my wrist bounces the rope, and Ghosts turns her nose to me. “Take her for a walk and see for yourself.”

Our staring match sends a trill of intrigue through me. My tongue touches my suddenly dry lips. His gaze drops to the action for half a second before he seems to come to a decision. An overstressed gait brings him within touching distance, and he extends his arm.

I drop the lead attached to my dog into his palm with a flourish.

He seems frozen. “You’re trusting a stranger with your dog?”

“You mean I’m trusting my dog with a stranger.” I prop my foot on the open door and rock my hips. “You’re assuming you’ll get very far if you try anything.”

His face appears to lose a shade. Pursing his lips, he makes a whistling noise. “Come on, pup. Let’s go for a walk.”

Ghost obviously keeps her face buried in her food. His ineffective tug has her raising her snout for a hefty sniff, only to return back to her bowl.

“She’s stubborn.”

I shrug. “She’s also deaf.”

He creases his brows as if she’s a puzzle to figure out. It appears my challenge to walk her has buried deep, and he’s not about to throw in the towel.

With cautious steps, he circles to the front of Ghost and drops to a crouch. Keeping a respectable distance, he waves his hand near her face. I have to give the guy points for not pissing himself and running, considering she already growled at him.

I mean, I trust my dog, but he has no reason to. I can’t decide if he’s inherently stupid or unquestionably brave.

Using my thumb, I scratch the side of my freckled nose. “She’s also blind.”

He groans and scrubs a hand over his face. “This is fun for you, isn’t it? I bet she’s not even the teensiest bit dangerous.”

I push away from my car. “Yeah, I’m going to have to stop you from trying that theory out yourself. I don’t need my dog taken away because you decided to test her limits.”

“Wait.” He holds up a large palm to stop me. I comply because I have nothing better to do, and this has been the highlight of my week. The slight tremble of his fingers isn’t hard to miss as he extends his hand toward my baby. He clenches it in a single tight fist before finally placing an open palm on her head. The relief in his exhale is audible.

“Please don’t tell me you’re afraid of dogs,” I tease.

He pets her more confidently. “Dogs? Never. I love the creatures. She-demons are a whole other breed.” She pushes her snout into his palm. He gives her another quick rub before rising. Ghost ignores his sharp tug and plops into a sit.

“Tap twice between her shoulder blades if you’re trying to take her for a walk.”

His skeptical glance has me biting back another grin. When she responds to his touch in the proper place, the awe on his face sends a proud mother thrill through me.

“If you think she’s a she-demon, you should meet her mother.” I circle back to his earlier comment as they trot between our vehicles.

He looks up with a broad smile and shields his eyes with a hand. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.” I step forward and shove my fingers into the front pocket of his jeans, absorbing the way his eyes widen in surprise. My voice drops into a husky whisper. “You do know what they say about redheads.”

I spin away and lean down into my car to hide another grin.

“Hey, what’s this?”

I tear off a huge bite of my cheese stick and face him with a mouth full. “Sorry to burst your ego, but it’s a poopy bag, not a ginormous condom.”

He barks out a choking laugh.



“Ye who walks the dog cleans up the log.”

“She-demons. The both of you.” With a shake of his head, he and Ghost meander to a brown grassy patch, the sound of his rich laughter floating on the wind.

I don't completely take my eye off the two of them as I clean the food bowl and return it to my car. Her water stays for a bit longer in case she's thirsty again.

Only minutes pass before they return. Ghost prances happily, and the guy holds the crap bag with a strange comfort at his side. He exchanges the leash with me and holds the bag up between us. “I'll dispose of this.”

“Not sure what else you'd do with it, but the environment thanks you,” I mutter with a grimace. Now would be a perfect time to escape, but my dog takes her time greedily drinking up. “I feel you, girl. He's made me thirsty too.”

Gravel crunching reverts my attention from my dog, and I look up as he returns with his hands tucked in his pockets.

“Does taking care of your dog earn me a name?”

“Sure. What should I call you?”

His chin drops to his chest.

“Fine. Her name's Ghost,” I reply cheekily, sending his gaze skyward.

“I meant you.” His husky mutter filters through my insides before coming to rest somewhere deep.

“I'm Evie Harris.” I give it up with startling ease.

“Nice to meet you, Evie. I'm Rhett Senova.”

Rhett. The name flits into an empty space in my brain for safekeeping. Ghost steals my attention when she walks to the end of her mat and leaps into my open door.

“Nice meeting you too.” I clean up the remainder of my dog's possessions and toss them in the car.

“Are you staying long? Maybe we can grab a bite to eat.”

“I’m all set,” I answer quickly. The hot sun rays disguise the flush of my skin. “This is just a temporary stop, so it’s better we leave things like this.”

A chin lift. “Right.”

“Thanks for walking my dog.”

Another chin lift. I don’t know him enough to read it as disappointment. Maybe he’s out of things to say.

It’s not until I climb into my car that I remember this is where I meant to crash for the night. I’ll look utterly ridiculous if I stay here after telling him I needed to be on my way. I crank the engine, and the full blast whirr of a/c sends my hair flying. A messy bun plopped on my head keeps it out of the way.

The rumble of an engine pulls my attention from my rearview just in time to see Rhett pull from his spot and drive away.

Well, that’s one issue diverted. I guess I’m free to stay now that I shooed him away. His departure leaves me time to create a list for the store and set off on my new endeavor in the morning. I just hope I can find some clients to take me on so I can stay.

For some reason, I’ve already taken a liking to this town.

Rhett

NOT WANTING to make her uncomfortable by sitting in my parked Jeep until she leaves, I speed away. Calypso's wasn't a certain point on my agenda, but I guess that's changed. I curse myself for not exploiting the opportunity to test out my moves. Those proposals are meant for the cloak of intoxication. Blaming hasty decisions on jumping into bed after one too many drinks makes it easier to look at ourselves in the mirror the next day.

But thinking of her curves has wishes of propositions weaving a seductive tale. I should have introduced her to my back seat.

The short drive to the bar eliminates space to think, and I'm parked before the images of her dissipate. No matter. A drink or two will clear the space between my ears and replace them with another beauty.

The evening air breeze has me thankful for my hoodie and rushing inside. The familiar atmosphere provides a soothing shot to my system after the day I've had. Dealing with Nora is never easy. At least it hasn't been since I found out she was screwing her boss. Without even the barest of apology, she went from crushing my soul to dying without grace on her deceitful, adulterous hill. The few times I've managed to bring up the topic, she shut me down by clinging to her hateful actions like a lifeline. Remorse wasn't in her vocabulary.

Evie was a bright spot in my day as fleeting as a hurtling asteroid streaking across the night sky.

A few seductive glances cast my direction relay my options. I don't have any rules for who I take to bed, and there's been a woman or two who's played host for multiple nights in a row. Unlike most men, this isn't a game to collect notches.

A teensy vein of revenge to ease the ache from the woman who cast me aside propels me. But the women who take me in now are treated with respect. I don't sleep with someone just to get my rocks off. There's no sick joy in kicking someone out the next morning or making them feel like a worthless fuck. Fifteen years of being with the same woman left me wanting to experiment.

And the desire to wash away the taste of someone who discarded me like her foul trash.

Enough memories. They piss me off, and I've had enough of that for one day. I flag down the bartender, who happens to be another friend, and Dane delivers my usual whiskey neat. With a chin lift in thanks, I settle in on the stool for a night of drinks until I'm ready to drive back to my temporary place to sleep.

Elbows resting on the bar, I twirl my cell between my hands. The damn thing lights up. I rush to flip it over, always waiting on the anxious precipice for Nora to call about our son.

*Nathan* flashes across the screen and transforms the anxiety into something less sinister.

"Yo," I answer and rub a fist over my chest.

"Judging by the background noise, you're out again. Mind if I join you?"

My chin lowers to my chest. "Be my guest. I just got here."

"Good. I'm walking up to the door now." With that, he clicks off.

I drop my phone the few inches to the bar top. I swirl my drink before sucking back a sip through my teeth. By the time I set the glass back down, Nathan's on the stool beside me.

"Your woman let you loose for the evening?"

The light snark rolls right off his back. He's deliriously happy these days, to the point of being nauseating. He orders his drink and pulls over a coaster to fidget with.

"She's having Cami over. I offered to watch Cedric to give the girls some relaxing time alone, but Cami nearly took my head off at the suggestion, so I thought I'd get out of Dodge."

Cedric is Nathan and Kiersten's infant son.

"Probably a good idea. You don't ever get between a uterus and a baby."

"No shit." He snorts and nods to Dane in thanks before picking up his drink.

"When are you two moving again? I'm available with the Jeep at any time, though if it's a Saturday, I'll need to bring Tommy along." The reminder of seeing Tommy is both sour and sweet. Six days is a long fucking time to go without seeing my own flesh and blood, but I'm counting the minutes until he's back under my care.

"Kiersten has to be out of her house next weekend. Then we close on mine in another month. We got lucky. It lines up perfectly with closing on our new house, so we won't be homeless for a few days."

A quick swallow of my drink disguises the lance of pain. I don't consider myself to be homeless. More like I'm on a perpetual camping trip like the summer I spent with my nomadic uncle.

"Call me when you need help. I'm happy to make trips."

He takes a swig of his own drink. "What about you? Made any decisions on selling that monster house of yours? I'm not usually one to condone spite, but in this case..." He trails off. Always the nice guy. Can't even properly criticize my whore of an ex-wife.

The truth gets tangled in a bramble of lies. What my friends don't know can't hurt me. I give a noncommittal shrug.

“No decisions yet.”

As if I had the power to make any right now. They still think we're sleeping on separate floors of the house with a co-parenting schedule like we did during the beginning of our separation. Once I left for good, Nora used the opportunity to let me see my son as little as possible.

He spears a glance around the room. “You have half the beds in town open to keep you warm. I can see why it's not at the top of your priorities.”

I shoot him a glare. “There are worse problems to have.” Like getting the damn thing out of Nora's clutches.

“I'm just saying. Our situations are completely different, but I know what it's like to have a plan laid out for life and have it swept out from under you.”

Nathan's wife died from cancer a few years back. A couple of years and knocking up his best friend convinced him to be open to love again. Once that gate opened, he hasn't looked back for a second. Long gone are the shadows beneath his eyes from guild-ridden sleepless nights of wondering if he's betrayed his dead wife.

I don't see myself taking that path. Sure, I had my plan. I knew what I wanted in life and was well on my way to ticking each box. And then the tidal wave of infidelity swept it away and left nothing but destruction in its wake.

There's a different type of devastation that comes from disloyalty. A person can mourn death. It's a lot harder to mourn betrayal when you're forced to confront that person several times a month.

“I've got it as good as it gets. Tommy and me, we're a team. And when he's with his mom, I find myself a companion. It keeps things clean.”

Nathan shakes his head.

“I mean it.” I toss back the dregs. “Can already picture Nora getting wind of me with a girlfriend. If I thought the claws were out before...” The *thunk* of glass against wood precedes the scrape of my stool legs as I stand. A wave of my hand signals Dane to fill another glass. “Be right back.”

I retreat for a quick piss and a regroup. Lying to my best friend’s face makes me feel like shit. But I’m not ready to come clean about the state of my life in the wake of Hurricane Nora.

They’ll want to help, no doubt about that. But I’m just not the type of guy to request assistance. I have money. I help my friends. I lend a hand with heavy lifting, and I babysit their little kids because I miss my own so much it’s a constant physical ache. And I walk strangers’ dogs because they’re tempting and sassy, and the challenge felt like a middle school dare I couldn’t refuse.

Leaning over the porcelain sink, hands braced on either side, I shake my head and stare at my reflection. Can’t have rogue thoughts like that darting about. The last time I had a school crush was Nora, and look where that got me?

The muffled music grows louder as I open the door. The weight of suggestive stares feels physical as I shuffle my way back to my friend at the bar. Familiar faces pass by. The curl of my lip into a smirk is automatic, but the subtle shake of my head is forced.

For the first time in a long while, I’m burned out.

I don’t want to play cat and mouse.

Sex sounds like a goddamn chore.

“Find who you’re looking for?” Nathan’s question has me yanking my chin into my chest.

“What?”

He shrugs. “I figured you were scoping out your options.”

I settle back onto my stool as heavy as a cinder block. Avoiding eye contact is easy as I reach for my fresh drink. “Nah, man. I’m taking the night off.”

“Did you tell them that? You have about ten pairs of eyes pinned to your back.”

My right forearm settles on my thigh, and I level him with a grin. “You jealous?”

His face pales beneath the dim pendant lights. He shoves me with a hand to my shoulder. “Fuck no.”

The smirk I wear easily slides into place. “I’m messing with you.”

“Yeah, well, you’re a terrible comedian. Kiersten riled would make Nora’s claws look stuffed with cotton.”

A swallow of whiskey conceals my laughter. “You’re not wrong.”

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WE ORDER bar food and catch up over appetizers while watching sports highlights on the flat screen over the bar. Tonight’s the first instance of normalcy for either of us in a while. Not wanting to bother my friend and his new wife, once his son Cedric was born, I kept a low profile. The two had finally found their way, and the last thing I wanted to do was drag him out to hear about my problems.

I can’t deny that after the day I’ve had this is nice.

After finishing off a plate of fries, along with three other appetizers an hour and a half later, Kiersten calls Nathan to let him know Cami went home. From his side of the conversation, the gist is clear. I’m not the only one being sought after tonight.

Nathan throws on his jacket, and I toss down a few bills while he’s distracted. Money may be tight, but old habits are hard to break, especially when I refuse to tell my friends the truth.

“Not to sound like a chick, but we need to do this more often. Sometime I don’t have Tommy would be a welcome change from my normal routine.”



His expression suggests I said the wrong thing. He just shakes his head. “Absolutely. It gives the girls a chance to get together too. Cami can’t get enough of fawning all over my boy. Won’t be surprised if she and Law pop out one of their own.”

“That’s been a long time coming. You’ll be in the race for number two soon.”

I swear Nathan’s skin turns a shade of green. “I’m still getting used to number one.”

I laugh and slap him on the shoulder. “See you around. And call me about moving, I’m serious. Happy to help.”

Nathan’s eyes slide over my shoulder before coming back to mine. “Sure, man. See you.”

Before I can decide whether to stay or go, a breathy voice calls from behind me. “Rhett.”

The tall brunette behind me isn’t a stranger, and I offer a playful half-grin. “Mallory.”

She twirls one of her soft ringlets around the finger of one hand and holds a pink drink in the other. “How’ve you been?” She leans in.

I rest a hand on the curve of her waist and land a kiss on her cheek. Her answering smile is bashful as we pull back. I leave my palm in place and give her a gentle squeeze.

“I’m good. How’re you?” Relaxing against the bar gives me a better view. She’s overdressed for this sort of place, but I—and the other males in the room—aren’t complaining. Her dress is short and black, and her heels are sky-high. The smoky hue of her makeup is alluring.

The way she bites her lower lip tells a story in half a second.

“I’ve been good, Rhett. Actually been wondering if I’d ever run into you again.” She peeks up at me beneath thick, heavy lashes.

“Aw.” I place a hand on my chest over my heart and flash her a grin. “You knew exactly where to find me.”

“That’s what I was hoping.” She jabs her straw between her lips. “Do you have plans tonight?”

This is the split-second decision I’d been determined to avoid. Mallory is a great woman, but I really am feeling the effect of burning the candle at both ends.

“I was about to head out, actually. I have an early morning.” The lie rolls out as smooth as silk.

“I do too,” she says huskily and moves closer to rest her hand on my chest. The heat is warm and sends messages to parts I’m fighting to ignore. “I’m actually out for a bachelorette party. The wedding is tomorrow morning.”

“That’s probably all the more reason not to slum it with me and rejoin your friends.” I use my thumb to tug her puffy lower lip from between her teeth. “You don’t want to be the one who ditches her friend on her pre-wedding night.”

She gives a one-shoulder shrug. “It’s actually my cousin.”

I roll my lips between my teeth, suppressing a chuckle. “Another time. I promise you’ll catch me around.” With a wink, I let her waist go and sidestep by to remove all contact. Her pout makes it that much harder to ignore my brain and take what my body wants instead.

She sneaks back to her group with a little less bounce in her step.

I’m accosted twice more on my way out the door, but as soon as I’m safely enclosed in my Jeep, the relief doesn’t come.

A part of me wants to jump out and walk back into that bar.

The other part, the one I try so hard to suppress and ignore, says I’m dangerously on the edge. How many drinks did I have? And how many more before all reason gets thrown in the trash?

I glance up into my rearview, noticing the dark rings beneath my eyes.

Alcohol and mirrors, man. Makes it easier to look at ourselves.

Evie

THE FIRST HUE of pink on the horizon peels open my gritty eyelids. Without much else to do at this hour, I leave Ghost asleep, lock my car, and trudge into the service station with my small tote and flip-flops. The weary cashier doesn't reveal whether he's worked the overnight or just clocked in when I pass over my five-dollar bill for a hot shower.

"Round the back," he grunts and slides over a key attached to a weathered paint stick.

"Thanks."

Two eighteen-wheelers are parked along the far side, and I pass by without a glance as I tread carefully to the shower. I don't want to inadvertently attract unwanted attention.

The shower is hot, albeit short, and I wander back inside with a T-shirt wrapped around the wet curls on my head.

Step one of living out of your car? Not giving a single fuck what other people think.

I select two packs of peeled hard-boiled eggs and a banana for breakfast. The junkier options call to me, but there's plenty of time to gorge on a greasy burger for dinner. Besides, eggs are one of Ghost's favorite treats.

My cell jangles my brother's ringtone from my tote, prompting me to hurry through returning the key and paying

for my measly food. Juggling the tote in one hand, I hang the plastic bag from my wrist and dig out my phone.

“Hey, bro.” I inject as much faux cheeriness into my voice as I can to ward off the questions.

“It’s actually me,” Caiti says. The sound of my beautiful sister-in-law’s voice cinches a string around my heart.

“Even better. How’s it going, babe?”

Her snort shackles me. “I should be asking you that. *How’s it going, babe?*” she mocks. “Are you freaking kidding me right now?”

“Whoa.” I find the willpower to unlock my feet and return to my car. “What did Eric tell you?”

“That’s exactly the problem! He’s told me nothing because, according to him, you’ve told him nothing.”

“I’ve told him all I can right now.”

“Oh, really?” I easily conjure the image of her with her hand on her hip and her shiny, jet-black hair swaying as she shakes her head at me. “Tell me where you are then.”

“I’m currently at a gas station getting breakfast. After I feed Ghost, I’m finding a store so I can get my supplies and start finding clients.”

Her sigh of frustration reveals I’ve missed the mark. “Smart-ass. I want to know what town.”

“I can’t tell you that yet. I want to see if I can establish myself here first. Otherwise, I’ll be moving to somewhere new.”

“You know you’re more than welcome to come live with us and clean my house as your rent.” Her joke warms me and guilt me at once.

I rouse Ghost with a gentle pat followed by a tap on the nose. With the phone wedged against my shoulder, I extend an egg out to her, which she happily takes.

“I know you two don’t understand, but I don’t want to move out of the country. I get it doesn’t make sense that a

single woman wouldn't jump at the opportunity to travel the world, but there's so much here I want to see and do yet. Maybe in a year or two, when I've saved enough money, I'll come for an extended visit."

"Don't worry about saving money. Just let us know, and we'll fly you over."

My head thuds against the headrest, and I close my eyes. "I miss you, Caiti. I miss you both so much." The thickness of my throat is impossible to conceal.

"I'm always a phone call away. And I'm going to talk to Eric about planning a visit to come see you whenever you're ready to tell us where you are. Just be safe, okay?" Her own watery reply reflects how I feel inside.

"Always. Tell my brother I love him, and I'll call him soon."

"Love you too, sister! I better know where you are by next week, or I'm calling a search party!"

I scrub my hand over my brows. "Speakerphone? Really, Caiti?"

Eric's voice comes at me again. "Don't blame her. It was my idea since you won't give up information any other way. I thought she could get it out of you somehow."

"I told him he doesn't know you at all if he thinks that's true," Caiti chimes in.

The welling tears warn me to wrap this up.

"I'll call you both soon. Love, love."

"Love you too!" Caiti replies.

"Love you." My brother's gruff voice spurs me to end the call before the dam breaks.

I toss my phone to the seat and leash Ghost for a quick potty break. She meanders around for only a minute before she does her business and lets me load her back into the car.

She settles back in her seat with a dramatic groan, and I reach for my phone to search for the nearest department store.

I find one ten minutes away and set off on our quick trip across town.

I park easily near the middle in the half-filled lot. I gather my things and crack the windows for Ghost. The brisk morning air means I don't have to worry about the car's interior heating. This will be a short trip. Leaving her in the car reminds me to add finding a dog sitter to my to-do list.

I tug the edges of my thin, plum coat around me as I rush inside. First stop, I need a caddy to carry my supplies. It'll double as a basket while I shop so I can make sure everything fits and that it's a good size.

After finding a modest plastic caddy, I speed shop through the cleaning aisle, selecting a range of products to get the job done. I ran a small cleaning business as a side job back home before everything went to shit, so this is familiar territory. I only hope I can pick up enough clients to bring in some cash to save for my first and last month's rent somewhere in town. Hopefully, at a place that doesn't require a credit check.

As I walk to the checkout lane, I pass by an aisle of dog toys. I can't overlook the opportunity to bring Ghost a present, even if money is tight for the foreseeable future. She was uprooted from her home just as I was, and even though I packed most of her comfort items in the limited space of my car, I had to leave some behind.

I stumble on a red plush in the shape of a dog bone that brings a grin to my face. Stitched in white thread in the middle is the word *Killer*. After her interaction with the sexy stranger last night, it's perfect.

The one-hundred-fifty-seven-dollar total at the register makes me cringe. I carefully extract and count the cash from a white envelope. I miss the days when I could simply swipe my card and not think about the total, but I don't currently have a bank account set up. Tate and I abandoned our joint account with the demise of our relationship. I figured I'd be a more responsible consumer if I had to hold the cash in hand.

The dog toy states otherwise.

“You must have quite the mess to take care of.” The voice comes from behind me, followed by the happy squeal of a toddler that cinches my heart.

I give the woman behind me a polite smile. “It’s just inventory.”

Her perusal from my hair to my shoes sets flame to my skin.

“Are you a maid?” She rests a hand atop the baby’s head, drawing my attention to the little one on her hip. The little toddler sports a pearly grin and a face sticky from the sucker clenched in his chubby fist. His brown eyes alight at my attention, and he reaches his other hand in my direction. His cuteness strikes me with a profound ache.

“I prefer housekeeper. I’m new here.”

“I could always use an extra hand if you’re looking for clients.”

Adrenaline spikes at her offer. “Absolutely. I’m available for a trial clean any day this week.”

Her smile isn’t unkind, but her upper lip curls into a slight sneer. “Perfect. How’s tomorrow? Between work and this little guy, my house is just too big to keep up with in my free time.”

I keep up with the polite curl of my lips while she flaunts her status. “I can give you my number, and you can text me your address.”

We exchange information, and I carry my supplies back to my car with an extra bounce in my step.

I toss Ghost her new plush as soon as I enter the car, and she sinks her teeth right into it. For a big pit bull, she’s surprisingly a gentle chewer. The new toy should last her a while. We zip back across town, and I pull into what I’ve decided is my spot at the truck stop.

I crack the windows and fire up a social media app on my phone. I search for Arrow Creek and come across a community group. Bingo.



First, I tap out a generic post regarding my cleaning services. Then I create one for a pet-sitter. The nerves are heavier with the second. More than likely because if I can't find someone to watch my dog, the first post will be moot.

*Hi, everyone. I'm looking for a last-minute dog sitter for a few hours tomorrow. Any recommendations on openings? She's a three-year-old pit bull and super sweet.*

"Stay pretty, Ghost." The deaf dog doesn't shift as I snap a cute picture of her lounging on my passenger seat. Her paws are crossed, and her head rests on top of them. I add the picture to my post.

A few replies trickle in as I wait.

*There's a kennel on main street. I believe it's \$50/day.*

*OMG a pit bull?? Dangerous. No, thank you.*

Nerves surface when I think about leaving my baby with a stranger. How am I going to find the perfect fit in less than twenty-four hours? A kennel would be a last resort. I set my phone aside and stroke Ghost's short fur.

The crunch of gravel alerts me to an approaching car. I swivel to watch it drive in, and my heart stutters at the sight of the familiar Jeep.

Crap! It can't be.

I sink lower as if that'll somehow disguise me from the driver. Typical Millennial. We avoid opening knocked doors, answering unknown numbers, and apparently try to hide in plain sight from hot men.

Rather than creep and indulge my curiosity, I pick my phone back up to check the replies. Just below the bitch who stereotyped all pit bulls, I see a reply that sounds promising.

*Cami Briggs*

*My fifteen-year-old daughter is off school tomorrow and would love to hang with your sweet girl. I'll message you.*

My inbox already indicates a new message.

*Cami: Hi. What time do you need someone to watch your dog? I can drop my daughter off.*

I reply immediately.

*Me: Thanks for the message. I'm actually looking for somewhere I can leave my dog for a few hours. I'm new here and haven't set up my house yet.*

Not technically a lie. If I ignore that I'm living out of my car for the foreseeable future.

Her reply is almost instant.

*Cami: Not a problem. That's even better. Come a little early so we can chat beforehand. Here's my address.*

I type the location into my GPS app. She's right in town.

"Did you get lost on your way out of here?"

I scream and accidentally bat my phone to the floor by my feet. Both hands wrap tight around the steering wheel as I turn a heated glare out my window.

"Was that necessary?"

Rhett rolls a toothpick around the corner of his lip. "Was about to ask you the same thing." He appears to look at my phone's new resting place, though the shades covering his eyes conceal his scrutiny.

"You scared me."

"Clearly."

I squint against the bright sun. "Can I help you with something?"

"Just wondering what you're doing back here, Rosie."

"It's Evie."

That damn lucky toothpick rolls to the other side of his mouth, but he remains quiet.

"I could ask you the same thing." I fill the silence with another comment. Why I feel the need is beyond me. Maybe if I keep my mouth shut, he'd go on about his business.

He leans against my car, right next to my face. A hell of a lot of willpower is required not to turn and stare at his crotch placed conveniently at eye level.

“I’m not the one *just passing through*.” He throws a version of my words back at me.

“I guess we’re both planning to stay a while.”

Neat brows dip below the dark shades covering his eyes. “You’re planning to stay here?” He throws an arm out at the convenience store before us.

Flames lick my cheeks at the admission. I straighten my spine and jut my chin. “It’s temporary.”

“Fuck,” he mutters low, just audible above the scrape of his shoe against the gravel.

“I don’t need your judgment,” I snap.

Both hands rise in a placating gesture, and he dips his head near my window in pursuit of my face. “None from me, Rosie.”

“Why are you calling me that?” I ask with a hint of the embarrassment still smoldering.

He straightens and tucks his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. “Because when I look at your hair, all I can picture is lying in a bed of roses.”

I quirk an eyebrow. “Is that a euphemism?”

He pulls the toothpick from between his lips. “Do you want it to be?” His voice drops low.

A shiver chases away the remnants of mortification and replaces it with something tantalizing.

Rhett suddenly knocks on the roof of my car and drags me reluctantly from wayward thoughts. “I have somewhere to be, but I expect you to be here at six o’clock tonight.”

I flatten my mouth into a thin line. “I don’t take orders, buddy.”

“If you’re as adventurous as you seem, you’ll take this one.”

“And if I don’t?” I shout at his retreating back.

He halts completely, turning only his chin to his shoulder to glance back. “Then you’ll be missing a damn good meal, Rosie.”

Rhett

SHADES COVER my eyes for the hangover I nurse well into the evening as I stand in the deli lane at the local grocery store. Thinking about Evie sleeping in her car sends a gut clench through me again. Even though she's a stranger, no woman should be put in her position. I'm determined to win her over with a hot meal and pry some info out of her pretty head.

Swear to Christ if my bitch of an ex wasn't holding my money hostage, I'd put Evie up at Arrow's Inn for as long as she needed. The weather hasn't quite signaled summer, and I know from sleeping in my own vehicle that the nights remain cold.

The image of her curled with her she-demon dog for warmth infiltrates my groggy brain, and I clench my fists.

The least I can do is cover a meal for the sassy stranger who's inhabited my mind since yesterday.

The steam from the bag warms my forearm as I take the packaged meal from the cashier and return to my vehicle. This is a step up from fast food, albeit not by much. Thanks to Nora, it's the only thing I can offer.

Another gut clench steals my breath, and I twist my fingers around the wheel as I pull into the convenience store parking lot. A swirl of nausea returns that I tell myself remains from the night before and not because the white Lexus is nowhere to

be found. I back the Jeep into a spot near where she parked this morning and kill the ignition. With nothing else to do, I roll down my windows to enjoy the last rays of the sinking sun and settle in to enjoy my picnic dinner by myself.

Halfway through my first chicken drumstick, the spin of tires on gravel alerts me to an approaching vehicle. A flash of anticipation skips a heartbeat. I sink my teeth into the meat to chase it away and watch that burgundy head of curls emerge.

A pair of winged, heavy-rimmed shades covers her gaze as she sashays my way with an alluring sway to her hips. A jade-green skirt that she changed into since this morning swishes around her calves. The simple white V-neck tee stretched across her tits and knotted around her waist steals the show for me.

“Get your ass in here, Rosie.”

She stops short and straightens her spine. I sink my teeth into my lower lip to conceal a smirk that I have a feeling will piss her off more.

“I think I’ve changed my mind,” she shouts at me through my open window.

*Fuck.* Before I lose what may be my only chance at a real conversation, I drop my food and hop out so fast my seat belt buckle clanks against the doorframe. I yank open the door to my passenger side.

“Your dinner awaits.”

Her steps halt, but she doesn’t turn back to me.

“Please.” I tack on for good measure. She doesn’t know me, but I’m not above begging. Something about her intrigues me like no woman before. I swat the silly thought from my mind.

With a twist of her feet on the gravel, she strolls back to the open door. She passes by, places one foot on the floorboard of my Jeep, and leans back out through the open window to put her face directly in mine.

“You’re on thin ice, Rhett.”

That may be so, but the flush on her cheeks tells me she enjoys it.

“How thin?” I drop my voice to a husky rumble. The seduction game is one I’m familiar with, and the best played ends up with no losers, which I intend to be the case.

The pucker of her plump mouth sends a sizzle straight to my dick.

She says nothing more. Her other leg joins the first, and she seats herself firmly in my passenger seat. I push the door shut. With my fingers clenching the open window, I lean partially inside.

“I hope you’re hungry.”

Too bad those sunglasses cover her eyes. The way her breath quickens, I’d guess she hears the undercurrent of my meaning. I’d like nothing more than to feed her my cock and finish her pussy off for dessert.

Yesterday was a missed opportunity I don’t intend to pass up again.

I climb back in and hand her a Styrofoam pint and plastic spoon. She holds them as if savoring the warmth in her palms.

“Are you cold?”

She shrugs. “Not really.”

I look pointedly at her hands, and she follows my gaze. An exaggerated swallow precedes her explanation.

“Um, it’s been a while since I’ve had a hot meal.”

Fuck. “How long?”

She busies herself by uncapping the container. Tendrils of steam curl into the air, and she lowers her face into them. “About two weeks if you don’t count fast food joints. I have to say, a greasy burger is nothing compared to this.”

I swallow past a lump in my throat. “That’s broccoli cheddar. I have a turkey wild rice if you prefer...”

“Oh, no. This looks divine. Thank you.” Her breathy appreciation isn’t necessary. It’s just a fucking cup of soup.

“Here, I got this too.” I snag the tub of chicken pieces from my dash and settle it on the center console.

She immediately reaches in and pulls out a drumstick. “Be careful. You’re spoiling me, Rhett.” She sinks her teeth into the drumstick and groans. “Seriously, though. I need to repay you. I start work tomorrow, and I can get you cash.”

Her words fill me with irritation. “It’s my treat, Rosie.”

Her shades clatter against the dash when she tosses them there. “Whatever. The next one’s on me then.”

I give a one-shoulder shrug. The next time will be mine as well. And the time after that. One thing Nora couldn’t kill is my chivalry.

“What job did you find?” I circle back to her previous comment.

Her eyes alight with excitement for the first time since we met. The stunning hazel shade appears nearly olive green in the waning sunlight.

“I’m starting a cleaning business. I had a side gig back home for extra cash. The startup is fairly light, and I managed to find my first client today while picking up supplies.”

I pop the top off my Styrofoam cup and drink the warm soup straight without a spoon. “I have some friends in town I could spread the word to.”

Her direct smile up close punches me in the gut.

“That’d be great. I can give you my phone number in case anyone is interested.” Leaning back in her seat, she blows a bit of steam from her spoon before savoring her first bite. “This is really good.”

“Yeah,” I mumble, the word sticking in my throat as I watch her enjoy a fucking cup of soup.

“What is it you do?” Her question seamlessly resumes the conversation.



“I run my grandfather’s extermination company. My grandparents adopted me as an infant, and when he was ready to retire, I took over the family business. It doesn’t sound like much, but we service three counties. I owe him a lot.”

“I think a stable career sounds impressive.”

An awkwardness settles over me for divulging too much. “What brings you to Arrow Creek?”

The stiffness of her neck reveals I struck something personal, but she recovers quickly. She savors one last bite of soup in her mouth before replacing the lid and setting the disposable cup on the dash. I don’t know what I expected of her expression, but when she faces me with red lining her eyes, I know it wasn’t that.

Sorrow bleeds from every inch, every crease of worry. “I made a mistake, and I lost everything.”

“I’m sorry,” I mutter, at a loss for what else to say. It doesn’t seem like my place to pry when we’re basically strangers.

She shrugs. “I know better for next time.” The heaviness shrouds the vehicle in regret, and I sense she’s about to flee.

“It makes you human, not a monster.”

“What?”

“Mistakes. Regret. It doesn’t make you a monster, no matter who you hurt or how badly you hurt them. It makes you human.”

“I think the person I hurt the most is myself.”

“Do you want me to make you feel better?”

“You couldn’t possibly—” That’s all she gets out before I silence her with my lips.

I settle my mouth against hers, plump and warm. The kiss is soft and exploring as I gently coax her to let me try.

We might be complete strangers, but my empathy burns bright for this woman stuck in a similar situation. The telling sign comes as her lips begin to move beneath mine.

“Say the word, and I can help. If only for a little while,” I mumble against her warm mouth.

A quiet moan escapes on her breath. “The word,” she pants before palming the side of my head and bringing me back.

She tastes my grin before I tuck it away for later and attack her mouth with more intensity. I nip her bottom lip in a request to open, and when she does, I slip my tongue inside. Her hair tangles nicely in my fist. I tug her head to the side for access and forge a trail of kisses down her neck. The sounds of her moans spur me on to deliver on my promise.

I tug her head upright again and release my grip on her silky locks. My palm settles on the base of her throat, where I tighten my fingers around the flimsy column. A squeeze serves as a warning. Her rounded eyes seeking mine find surprise. I’ve never grabbed a woman’s throat before, but something inside me wants to possess her.

“Put your right foot on the dash, Rosie.”

Moving only our eyes, we watch her comply as I keep her head pinned.

Her skirt swoops lower when she raises her right foot as asked. A chilled breeze sweeps through the open windows and billows the green fabric between her legs.

“Spread them wide.” The order scrapes like gravel up my throat.

She rests one knee on the open window ledge and the other against the console.

I press my thumb into the side of her throat, feeling the steady thrum of her carotid, and flick my attention to her face. Rather than fear, her dilated pupils reveal she’s turned way the fuck on.

“Does the open window make you cold?”

“A-A little.”

I dip my head and suck her lower lip into my mouth, drawing from her a breathy moan.

“Then we should warm you up. Don’t you think?”

“Yes.” She tries to lift her lips to mine, but I hold her in place with a warning squeeze and a tsk.

“Hold still. If you move around too much, someone might see what you’re doing.” With a wicked grin, I gather the fabric closest to me and drag it up her leg. “If you can hold still, no one will suspect a thing.”

Her mouth drops open on a pant as my fingers slowly walk along her smooth, pale skin to her panties. I release her throat and press my forehead against hers in order to watch. I want to see her face change as I plunge into her for the first time. I switch the fabric of her skirt into my right hand and use my left to force the gusset of her panties to the side. The damp material clings to the back of my hand.

“Last warning, Rosie.” I drag my index finger along her wet slit.

She pants and shakes her head, halting my movements.

“Is that a no?”

Her head shakes again.

“Use your words, or this stops.”

She flushes scarlet from the tip of her V-neck to the roots of her hair. “I need you to finger me.”

My own groan works its way out, and I bury my face in her neck. I wasn’t expecting her to be so explicit, but the words *finger me* send a rush straight to my dick. Her bold demeanor makes everyone before this moment seem inadequate.

I part her flesh and delve my middle finger in straight to the hilt. She gasps in my ear.

As I slowly retreat and push my finger in again, I work the side of her neck with my mouth. I suck and nibble and taste the sensitive area below her ear, careful not to leave a mark. She curls her elbow and palms the back of my head, holding me to her. Her tits thrust out as her hips buck into my hand.

“Want more?”

Rather than speak, she nods frantically against me. On my next outward glide, I add another finger and work them both inside. My thumb finds her clit. I rest my forehead against her temple and watch as desire washes over her face.

Her mouth drops open again while her neck arches against the headrest, and her sounds of pleasure would put any porn star into retirement. Not that she’s even remotely acting. She’s vocal in a way most women are afraid to be. I wipe my grin across her cheek before taking her lips to silence her. Although the erotic noises are my new favorite melody, I don’t want to attract attention before I bring her over the finish.

She uses her propped foot as leverage to ride my hand. I heed her tightening walls and continue to curl my fingers deep as I circle her clit. The moment her eyes slam shut, I thrust my tongue inside her mouth. She sucks it deep before releasing it with a sharp cry that I swallow down my throat. The orgasm sends tremors through her limbs.

I slow my fingers, not wanting to pull out before she stops twitching.

While distracting her with my mouth, I slip free. Her moan at the loss nearly makes me give her back my hand.

“That was...” She fights to slow her breath.

“I’m glad.” I lower her skirt and sit back in my seat. Scanning the lot, we remain alone.

She rolls her head toward me. “Do you want me to—”

I shake my head before she’s finished. “This was just for you.”

“Well, um, thank you?”

Fuck, she makes bashful sexy too.

“You’re cute.”

She tucks a wayward lock behind her ear. “I should, um, probably feed Ghost and take her for a walk.”

I curl my fingers around the bottom of the steering wheel.  
“Okay.”

The click of the door tells me she’s opened it. “Are you going to be sleeping here tonight?”

My head cocks. I’d nearly forgotten she’s sleeping in her car as I do the same. Even though I haven’t disclosed as much, I get the impression she already knows. Last night, I fell asleep alone outside Calypso’s, but if she sticks around, I might need to find a new location.

I shrug, not wanting to reveal too much. Who knows who she might run into in town. My gut says she’s trustworthy, but for all I know, she likes to gossip.

“I haven’t decided.”

I can tell I chose the wrong words. I feel the fracture of our trust like a physical thing in the air between us.

“I guess I’ll see you around.”

In a billow of jade-green cloth, she swirls from my Jeep and into the dusk, leaving me with a cloud of regret.

Evie

THE KNOCK I present on the door the following morning raises the first chorus of nerves. I clench Ghost's lead tightly in my fist and step back on the small porch. The wooden interior door opens seconds later to reveal a cute, petite brunette with dark hair and a welcoming smile.

"You must be Evie." She seeks out my furry companion, and her eyes light. "And this must be Ghost. Come on in." She throws the door open wide.

Ghost wags her stubby tail excitedly as we enter a new place for her to explore. Her nose descends on the carpet just beyond the entryway, and her excited huffs and grunts fill the initial silence.

"You can drop her leash. I'm Cami, by the way. Evelyn is just finishing getting ready. She's my daughter. Just so you know, this is her first time, so she won't be here alone. I'll be around to keep an eye on things, but this seemed like the perfect opportunity to get her feet wet. She just loves animals and wants to work in the veterinary field. I told her she should start with dog sitting."

How she manages to retain her breath and not look like a tomato after that spiel, I'll never know. Maybe it's my fair skin and red hair, but I can't speak for more than a few seconds without turning shades.

The smile of relief gracing my face comes naturally after her infectious excitement.

“Ghost will make it really easy on her.”

A young teen bounds into the room with a squeal. Upon first glance, I can tell she’s the spitting image of her mom, except her hair is more auburn than dark brown. That little string around my heart cinches.

“Oh my gosh! She’s so cute!” Presumably Evelyn crouches down and claps her hands while making kissy noises. “Here, girl.”

I tuck my hands into the short pockets of my black jeans. “Ghost is really special because she’s deaf and blind.”

Evelyn’s expression morphs into one of awe. “Oh, wow. Teach me her commands.”

My heart warms at the instant love for my baby. These two haven’t batted a single eyelash at her breed, and Evelyn is nothing short of eager to learn how to communicate with her. I lower from my shoulder the bag containing all Ghost’s special items.

After a short tutorial on how to orient Ghost in her new surrounding with the help of the special mats, we follow Evelyn and Ghost outside for a quick trot around the yard. Cami and I lean against opposite railings as we watch them play, but my time here nears a close. I have to get going to my first client.

I worry my lip. “I think she’s got the hang of it already. Thank you so much for taking her today.”

Cami waves my words away. “I have a feeling she’ll be up to dog sitting any time she’s free.” Her head turns in my direction, and her brows crease. “I promise she’ll be okay.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Honey, you look like a new momma dropping her infant off on her first day of daycare. I would know. I went through it, and it was rough.” There isn’t a hint of condescension to be

detected. She clasps her hands beneath her chin. “We’re going to take the best care of her.”

I blow out an exaggerated breath and shake my hands out at my side. “I know.”

A gentle palm lands on my shoulder. “Take your time.”

It’s my turn to wave a hand in front of my face. “I’m being silly. I’m going. I’ll be back this afternoon.”

Cami and Evelyn watch me return to my car and drive away.

Now that the first emotional aspect of my day is underway, my thoughts leech from my control and turn to other things. Rather than the anxiety about working with my first client, memories from the night before breach the barrier I established.

I spent half the night in my car parked just down from his, fighting with myself not to look over and see what he was doing. Was he asleep? Did he look over at me? Thoughts of returning to his car with an offer of reciprocation plagued me well past the point of starry darkness.

I let him bring me to an incredible orgasm and then fled the scene like an idiot. What else was I supposed to do? Even though he made me come with his hand, I wanted more. I wanted to go all the way. I wanted to see if he was as magnificently talented with other parts of his fit body. It didn’t help that he waved my offer away like a pesky mosquito.

What guy turns down a chance to get laid or, at the very least, a blow job?

I should have driven to another parking lot for the night. At least until the awkwardness could dissipate.

This morning, I had somewhere to be, removing time to dwell on Rhett and his many talents. After taking care of Ghost and a quick bite to eat, I sped out of there without checking to see if he was awake.

My reminiscing ends as I pull onto a winding road just outside the city limits. The GPS advises the destination is up



ahead. What I don't expect is the mammoth two-story structure that emerges from behind tall, sentinel pine trees. The woman failed to specify that her home was more than three thousand square feet and might take days to clean. Holy crap. I didn't have clients with houses like this back home. I hope she's willing to discuss expectations and fair pay.

My Lexus looks drab parked next to her Mercedes. My caddy is heavy but still manageable as I drag it from the back seat and up the concrete walk to her front door. When I ring the doorbell, I half expect a butler to answer and not the slender woman with strawberry-blond hair pulled into a sleek ponytail.

“Glad you could make it.”

Once I take over opening the door, she spins on her heel and retreats through the open foyer.

I swap my shoes for a pair of clean slip-ons to wear while I work and leave my caddy to search for my client. I find her in the kitchen supervising her young son with his breakfast. At the vast open-plan space, I amend my earlier assessment. Definitely closer to four thousand square feet.

“This is Tommy. And I'm Nora. We skipped introductions the other day.”

“I'm Evie. I've brought a contract for you to look over. We should also discuss expectations and agree on wages before I get started.” I had the foresight to print off spares before I left home in Colorado, knowing it'd be a while before I could afford to create more. The blank template is perfect for tailoring to each specific client's needs and rates, and only contains my first and last name.

She removes the papers from my grip only to slide them across the counter. “I'm sure everything is in order. And whatever your rates are is fine.”

I straighten at her dismissive tone. “It's important we're on the same page—”

She hands her son a strip of banana, and he mashes it in his fist. “Is fifty dollars an hour enough?”

My tongue nearly springs from my mouth. “I, um. I thought I’d start with a surface clean to see how long it takes me. Deep cleaning rates—”

“Of course,” she cuts me off. “Eighty for deep cleaning.”

“I don’t think that’s quite the industry standard.”

“You’re right. Let’s do one hundred.”

Oh my God. “Eighty is fine, Nora.”

She glances up at the use of her name. For the first time since I stepped foot in her home, she really looks at me. Her critical gaze scrutinizes my simple black skinny jeans and white V-neck tee. Luckily, it’s hard to feel inadequate wearing cleaning attire.

“I think with your job description, we’ll stick with one hundred. I expect a deep clean once a month and a surface clean twice a week.”

What land of money trees did this woman come from? I’m torn between speaking up and keeping my mouth shut. Obviously, she’s judgmental of my career choice, and she seems like a woman who’s used a cleaning service before. Maybe she’s just generous?

“I can do that.” I remove the pen I stashed in my pocket and retrieve the contract. This needs to be in writing. “Would you like to pre-schedule those dates now?”

She waves a hand dismissively. “That’s fine.”

Using my phone calendar as a reference, I begin scribbling the dates at the bottom of her contract. Two a week, with a deep clean on the Sunday after next. I try not to concentrate too hard on the dollar amounts swirling in my head. If she’s serious about this pay, I could be in an apartment in a month. With one client. Anything extra can go toward my debt.

A phone rings from nearby, and Nora snaps to attention.

“Do you mind cleaning him up for me? I have to get this.” She rushes out of the room without waiting for my reply.

“Babysitting rates are extra,” I mumble beneath my breath as I tie my hair up into a messy bun. “Hey, Tommy.”

At the sound of his name, the little boy looks at me with huge, round eyes and a messy grin. He thrusts his banana-covered hand in my direction. “Nanas!”

I giggle. “That’s right. Bananas. Let’s clean you up so you can play.”

“Play race cars?”

I wet a cloth and swipe gently at his face. He purses his lips and closes his eyes while he shakes his head to hide from the cloth.

“Do you like race cars?” I ask. In my mind, I’m begging him not to cry. He puffs his cheeks, and a toothy smile appears again.

“Race car crash!”

God, he’s adorable. “I wish I could play, buddy. Let’s go find your mom so I can get to work.”

I deposit the dirty tray from his high chair on the granite kitchen island. After picking a few remnants of food from his green dinosaur shirt, I hoist him onto my hip. He’s lighter than I expect him to be. A warm comfort expands in my chest at holding a baby close. What really does me in is when he folds his chubby fist around a lock of my hair and lays his head on my shoulder.

Every instinctual urge inside me screams to protect this kid at all costs. He’s such a little treasure.

I wander with him through the first floor until I spot a set of French doors resting open. Without being intrusive, I lean into the crack and find Nora sitting at a desk. She’s no longer on the phone, so I give a tentative knock. As much as this little guy melts my heart, he’s sort of in the way. I have at least five hours of work ahead of me.

She looks up as I enter. Thankfully, her expression is clear of annoyance. “Sorry. That was my attorney.” She holds her

hands out to Tommy. He appears reluctant to untangle my hair from his fingers.

“He’s all cleaned up. I’m going to get started now if that’s okay.”

“By all means. I’ll have your wages and the contract signed by the time you’re done.”

A polite smile slides into place. “Thank you. That’d be great.”

I set off for my supplies and shake off the feeling slithering inside. It’s not exactly sinister, but something about this woman feels off.

Hours of work ahead will give me time to shake it off and settle in. I can’t be too upset if Nora ends up being my best client. She might be my ticket out of homelessness.

The house isn’t as bad as I expect from her requested schedule. I zip from room to room, wiping off surfaces and vacuuming floors. I have extra time near the end and get started washing windows. Anything I can knock out of the way now will free more time to get down to the really dirty details during my deep clean.

I’m really intrigued by the master bath and walk-in shower with a massive stone bench seat. I imagine that would really come in handy for shower sex, and I add it to my mental dream house list. Actually, I admire most of this house and wish I could take a picture for a Pinterest board I’ll never actually create.

The all-white kitchen has plentiful cabinets and granite countertops. The space opens into the informal dining room and living room beyond that. The back wall of windows overlooks acres of yard. The old pines from the front surround the property in greenery and lush forest that transport me to a secluded cabin somewhere and not just on the outskirts of town.

Besides the office, the house also contains a full library suite with custom built-ins and books on every shelf. I have to

restrain myself from plucking one out and skimming a few pages instead of clearing them of dust.

The strangest thing about the house is the lack of personality. Not a single family picture to be found. If it weren't for the toddler's things, this could be a model home.

Before long, five hours have passed, and I'm done for the day. Nora is nowhere to be found as I pack up my supplies. On the kitchen island, nearly where I left it this morning, lies the contract—signed. A white envelope of cash rests beside it.

I peel out of there with a giddy smile on my face, eager to get my pup and find something to eat. Ghost returns from her day happy as can be, and Cami makes me promise to call the next time I need assistance.

As I drive back to our spot, I can't help but think maybe I found a friend in this town. Arrow Creek doesn't seem like a bad place to settle down. If I can keep building my client list, I might be able to run a successful business and do it with good company surrounding me.

I know better than to get too ahead of myself, though.

I've had experience with the best intentions souring fast. So while I'll start to immerse myself in this town, I won't hesitate to keep one foot on the gas pedal as a backup plan.

Rhett

TRYING to get to know someone without the sole intention of getting into their pants is harder than I thought. The last time I had a friend of the female variety and didn't screw them would probably be when I met Nora.

The first step would be not to look like a fucking tool leaning against the side of my Jeep with a bag of steaming hot food in my hand, but here I am. I can't lend her a free room, but I can be a friend. Never mind that I already visited the trove beneath her skirt.

I won't say no to a delightful fuck in the back of my Jeep, but I'm trying to help in the only way I can that doesn't involve my dick.

The pressure of my decisions sweeps away when I catch the first glimpse of the white Lexus turning around the bend. Timing is on my side. The second meal I've provided this week won't be cold. As long as she likes lasagna and garlic bread, I'm golden.

I approach before she even shifts into park. She left hastily last night, and I'm eager to mend the gap. She springs from her seat with a flush painting her cheeks pink. A fabric tote is clutched in one hand and a leash in the other.

"Do you mind taking care of Ghost so I can change out of my work clothes?"

I peruse her behind darkened shades, from her curls to her sandaled toes. The black jeans hug her long legs to her ankles and accentuate every curve around her waist. The top is reminiscent of the one yesterday. I think plain white tees might be my new favorite piece of clothing.

With a rustle of plastic, I thrust the bag between us. “I got dinner.”

She regards me with a crinkle of her nose. “Thank you. But if you don’t mind, I have banana smashed into my shoulder, and who knows what kinds of germs I picked up while cleaning.”

The dog. Duh. “Right. Sorry, I can take her. Let me just...” My options are limited for where to place our meal. Either in the car with the dog who looks mighty hungry or back at my Jeep with the memories of last night.

Think friend thoughts.

“Trade.” I offer her the food while I snag the leash. I tap Ghost twice between the shoulder blades, and she hops out with a tail wag.

“You remembered.” The slight awe in her voice injects me with something I haven’t felt in a long time, but I brush it away.

My shoulder twitches toward my ear. “Go get changed, Evie.” Without waiting for her response, I lead her dog to the field beyond the parking lot. She does her business, and we meander along to stretch our legs. I don’t know about the dog, but I find myself needing more exercise the longer I live in my Jeep, so I don’t mind spending a few extra minutes taking a walk.

Time seems to stretch before a prickle warns me that Evie’s been gone a tad too long. Though she didn’t mention it before we separated, it’s possible she paid for a shower after a day of cleaning houses. Keeping the leash secured in my fist, I lead us across the parking lot to the entrance to the convenience store. The dusk lighting plus the fluorescent bulbs

inside provide a clear picture. Evie doesn't appear to be within view.

Content to wait, I lean against the brick exterior and prop a foot on the wall behind me. Ghost settles at my feet. I stroke her fur on the top of her head, mildly amused at the change in our relationship in just a day.

“You're not bad, are you, girl?”

Just as I go for another swipe, I hear a strained voice.

“I said leave me alone.”

My foot propels me off the wall. Every muscle in my body grows taut as I round the corner. That *fucking* trucker Dan corners Evie against the building. He doesn't touch her, but her body language clearly communicates he's invading her personal space.

I'm not the only one who takes notice. Ghost releases a vicious-sounding snarl and snap. Dan's gaze flicks from Evie's breasts to the dog on the strained leash. He retreats a hasty step out of self-preservation.

Hell yeah, she-demon.

Before I can utter a word, Evie pulls out a wicked-looking sharp knife from Lord only knows where and thrusts it in the vacant space between them.

“Between this knife and my dog, you won't have any hands left if you come at me like that again.”

“Fucking crazy bitch,” he spits and retreats another step when Ghost lunges again.

“Speak to her like that again, and this leash is out of my hands.”

Another step, another recoil. I nearly laugh that he's too scared to turn his back.

“Thanks,” Evie mutters once Dan's out of earshot.

At the sound of her voice, Ghost ceases pulling. While keeping one eye on Dan, I give her my attention and notice how fast she's breathing.



“You okay?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Her fingers flex on the knife’s handle before she easily stows it away.

I cautiously step closer, afraid she’s going to drop or bolt. “You already said that, Rosie. I don’t know what for. You handled him like a badass.”

She nods, but when she turns her wild eyes to me, it’s clear she’s not processing this well.

“Fuck. Come here.”

She doesn’t hesitate to let me fold her in my arms. The breeze flutters in the space between our bodies, bringing the sundown chill, and I wrap her tighter. She cinches the back of my athletic fitted hoodie in tight, juddering fists. With my glare pinned on the truck of the man who did this to her, who stole her sense of security and independence, I hold her tightly to my frame until the trembling concludes with a shuddered exhale.

“You good?” I pull back and wipe a strand of hair sticking to her cheek.

She releases her lower lip from the grip of her teeth. “I think so. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t even think about it. Holding a beautiful woman doesn’t require an apology.”

The feel of her hands releasing the fabric at my back sends a dart of fury through me. No man should ever make a woman feel that fear. The tug of the leash steals my attention before I can share the thought with her.

“I can take her back to the car.”

Evie’s hand wraps so close to mine the heat of her small fist emits against my skin. Replacing my scowl with a smirk I’m not quite ready for, I move the strap out of her reach.

“She’s my new best friend. The way she came to your defense makes her as badass as you are. I might keep her.”

I swear she grunts in a way that rivals her dog.

“Seriously, though.” I hand her the leash, and we stroll to our cars. “I’m glad you don’t have a damn chihuahua riding around with you. Ghost did her job and did it well.”

“My brother will be pleased when I tell him.”

I cup her elbow and stop us twenty feet away from what I hope is still a lukewarm dinner. “You have a brother, and you’re living *here*?” My arm sweeps the near-vacant lot like I’m a host on a game show and the producers just revealed the convertible prize.

She tries to pull her arm back, but I retain my grip. The explanation is a clue. One I want more than I’m willing to admit.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yes, I have a brother and a sister-in-law.”

“That doesn’t explain what you’re doing here.” A strong desire to pull her close has me reacting the opposite, and I let her go.

She rolls the shoulder of the now free arm and continues to her car. Between ducking in and out for Ghost’s food items, she prattles an answer.

“They live in Germany. I didn’t want to uproot my life and move overseas.”

“So you uproot your life to live in your car?”

She sets Ghost’s food bowl down with a slap and does the same with the water dish, sloshing some over the side. “Dammit!”

When she ducks back in for a third time, I cup her bicep and halt her movements. The scowl she wears as she turns to me is damn cute. But my intention wasn’t to rile her, even if I do enjoy her feisty attitude.

I peel my shades off my eyes and slip them to rest in my hair. Free from barriers, I implore her to listen.

“I’m not judging you or your situation. If anything, I want to help. To do that, I need to understand. What brought you to Arrow Creek?”

“What difference does it make?” She signals Ghost to eat and then straightens, returning her gaze to mine. Uncertainty and distrust swirl there, along with a tiny flame of heat.

I can’t help but brush my thumb over the apple of her soft cheek. “We’re not so different, you and I.”

I snag her hand and lean into the open car to grab our meal. Ignoring her sounds of protest, I lead us to the front of the car and start unpacking. The weather holds an evening breeze that cools but isn’t too intense to remain outside. She watches intently as I peel back the aluminum lid from the pan of lasagna. I dig a fork in the immediate center, pulling a long string of melted mozzarella as I raise it in the air. The billow of curling steam indicates the food is still hot. Perfect for the cool evening.

I stare into her hazel eyes with a dare to refuse. “Open.”

Those puffy pink lips curl between her teeth for half a second before releasing with a smack. Her tongue touches the lower one, leaving behind a glistening dew. She finally acquiesces with an eyebrow raised in challenge.

The second the warm Italian flavors touch her tongue, her entire face melts, and she closes her eyes. Her groan of appreciation is one I file away for later.

“Oh, God. It’s wonderful.”

I move in for another bite, this time keeping it for myself. “Dig in, babe. I can’t eat all of this alone.”

I’m pleased when she follows my lead and sinks the other fork into the middle too. Nothing wrong with splitting a meal a little unconventionally.

She breaks the silence a few bites later. “My parents died here.”

My brows dip over my eyes as I snap my gaze to hers. She holds a hand to cover her mouth as she chews and waves her fork around.

“Not here, as in Arrow Creek. Here, as in the United States. I grew up near Denver, Colorado. We lost them both in

a car accident when I was only fourteen. The reason I didn't move to Germany is because I don't want to leave them behind."

"It's impossible to leave them behind. You carry them everywhere inside you, babe."

Her head bobs sharply. "Right. I know that, but leaving the country makes it more permanent. At least this way, I can always drive back for a visit. Not spend fourteen hours on an airplane to cross oceans."

I hand her a slice of the fresh garlic bread. The aroma of garlic filters between us, and we both take a minute to savor that first bite.

"Wouldn't have to be permanent. You could move to get back on your feet and get a little cash."

Her glance beyond my shoulder reveals more than I think she intends. "It's going to take more than a little while to find stability again."

"Tell me." I reach out and run my index finger along her exposed arm. "Please."

She shakes her head, not ready to reveal her secrets. The challenge to wear her down becomes even more enticing. "I can't. This cleaning job is going to make a big dent in getting what I need, so if you can send some good vibes my way, I'd appreciate it."

I drop it for now, even though I want to get her to open up. She doesn't understand that I could help. Once this shit with Nora is settled, I'll be free to do what I want with my money. I have more than I could ever need, and I want to help her.

"Are we friends yet, Rosie?"

"What?"

"How many days in a row do you have to spend with a complete stranger before you consider yourselves friends?"

"At least five," she replies surprisingly quick. I bark out a laugh.

“I’ll consider us friends after five.” My tone changes from searching to a command. “Tell me about the job.” I dig in for another bite. We’ve killed nearly half the pan, and I’m filling up fast.

She moans around a mouthful of garlic bread. “It’s a big job. The house is enormous, but the woman is generous too. She’s paying way above my rates, and I don’t have a clue why. I tried to talk to her about it, but she waved me off like it was no big deal. Oh! She has the most adorable little boy. That’s why I had bananas smeared on my clothing. He gave me the sweetest hug.”

Hearing about a little boy sends a pang rippling through me. The organ that sustains life gives a threatening squeeze.

“I also put out a search on social media, so hopefully, I can add to my client list soon.”

“That’s great,” I mumble through a dry throat. I should have thought to bring us a drink. “I’m going to grab something from inside. You thirsty?”

“Just water would be nice.”

“I’m on it.”

I shuffle around the car and rub a fist against my breastbone. Thinking about Tommy fucking hurts sometimes.

As I enter the air-conditioned building, my phone rings from my pocket. *Marcus* flashes across the screen—my attorney.

“What a time for you to call. Were your ears ringing?”

“Why? Are you talking about how handsome I am again?”

I bark out a laugh. “When I said that, it was in reference to you being eye-fucked by my almost ex-wife. Don’t flatter yourself.”

The sound of papers rustles through the line. “Speaking of which, I spoke with her attorney today. She wants to meet you in person, and as your lawyer, I highly recommend against it without me present.”

I stop in my tracks in front of the fountain drinks. “What the fuck for?”

“She says she’s ready to give up the house if you’re ready to discuss what she calls *adequate compensation* for losing out on her dream.”

My snort of derision has no hope of being contained. “I didn’t realize getting caught screwing your boss fell into that category. The house has to sell. There’s not another option unless she wants to forfeit her half of what’s in the bank accounts.”

“I said the same thing. She can fight all she wants, but she’s going to lose if this goes before a judge. You’ve agreed to a fifty/fifty split, which is beyond what she deserves at this point.”

“Well, thank you. I’ll take what you said into consideration, but if it’ll get her to give in sooner, I might just get it over with.”

“Again, I advise against it.”

“I hear you.”

We hang up, and I pay for a fountain drink and a water. When I return to the car, I find Evie bundled in an oversized dark gray sweatshirt and the food packed away.

“Here.”

“Thanks. I hope it’s okay I cleaned up. I have a cooler that can keep it cold until tomorrow.”

“Sounds like another date.”

Her gaze snaps to mine. “This isn’t a date.”

I give her a sultry wink. “I know that, Rosie. I’m just fucking with you.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“That’s not what you said when I had my fingers buried inside—”

She releases a charming squeal and slaps me across the chest, pushing the air from my lungs in an audible *Oof!*

“You deserve it.”

Resuming her previous position, she rests her butt against the hood and leans back on her palms, tipping her face to the last rays of the sun. In a few minutes, the first stars of the night will peek out amongst the scattered clouds.

I mirror her stance, raising one hand to scratch the side of my nose with my thumb. “Currently, the woman who cheated on me after fifteen years together is trying to take everything I own—including sole custody of our son.”

Evie’s attention on my face feels physical, but I keep my gaze averted, not wanting to see the pity shining there. Not yet anyway.

My eyes burn, and my throat constricts like a vise clamps around the cartilage. “What she’s too stupid to realize is I’d give every cent I have if she’d just give up this fight. Our divorce already means that I’m guaranteed to miss half of his childhood. I don’t know how that’s not good enough for her.”

“Rhett.” Her gentle voice cradles my name.

“Love my boy.” I cough to clear the thickness in my throat. “Love him more than myself.” My revealing gaze holds her pinned. “I love him so much that I’m willing to give it all up and live out of my fucking car so she can have our house to herself.”

Concern creases her forehead. “That doesn’t seem right.”

“Of course it’s not right. None of it’s right. The fact I had a plan for our lives that she threw to shit isn’t right. But it’s life. I’m just out here doing the best I can.”

Needing a modicum of comfort, I seek her warm hand and thread our fingers together. “Just as you, Rosie. Doing the best you can.”

“We aren’t so different.” She repeats the phrase I said earlier.

It takes on a different meaning, hearing part of her story and sharing mine. I can't put my finger on it, but I vow to myself. If I can sort this shit with Nora, I'll help Evie out of her situation. Even if that means getting her a plane ticket to Germany.

As we sit under the starry sky, I can't help but feel a little less alone and slightly more hopeful in this truck stop parking lot.



Evie

THE SHRILL RING sounds through my speakers as I wait for my brother to pick up the phone. Excitement flows through me, and I twist my grip on the steering wheel. The tires spit gravel as I drive a little too fast back to the parking lot to meet Rhett.

“Are you finally calling to tell me to pick you up at the airport?” Eric splashes his mood across my enthusiasm.

“I’ll just hang up.”

“Wait! I’m only joking. How’s it going out there?”

I take a left onto the narrow road leading to my temporary home. “I was calling to tell you that it’s going really well so far, but if you don’t want to hear about it...”

He sighs. “I don’t want to hear about it because I wish my baby sister would just come live with me for a while.”

“You and I both know that’s not going to happen. However, after the client I secured this week, I might be up for hosting you in a month or two.”

“Why wait that long? We can come sooner and help you get settled.”

A frisson of anxiety races up my spine. “No.” I react a little too quickly. “I’m really busy working right now, and it wouldn’t be much fun for you guys,” I amend. “Once I’m a

little more settled, I can take a few days off. Show you the town.”

Not that I’ve seen much of it yet myself.

I slide into my usual spot and tamp down the part of me pleased to see Rhett’s Jeep. He’s already crossing the space between our vehicles before I’m in park.

Too busy ogling the man wearing fitted Levi’s and a long-sleeved blue Henley, I nearly miss my brother’s question.

“Have you heard from Tate?”

“Eric,” I hiss as a warning. He swore to never bring up his name unless I brought him up first.

The sound of a throat clearing emanates through the speaker. “He’s been calling, Evie. He’s just worried. He also mentioned something about mail he needs to get to you.”

I rub my forehead and sigh. “When I’m ready, I’ll get you a forwarding address. *A PO Box*. You can give that to him.”

“Okay,” he responds in a sympathetic tone.

Rhett stands beside my window with a thermos clutched to his chest. I hold up my index finger to him, and he nods.

“I have to go. I just wanted to check in. I’m doing okay, and things are looking up for me.”

A silence pulses across the line.

“You’d tell me, right? If you weren’t okay, you’d tell me? Because you have to know I’d want to help.”

A vise compresses my heart. “You took care of me from the time I was fourteen until I could stand on my own two feet. I know I can count on you for anything. But you have to know I need to figure out some things on my own.”

His coarse chuckle warms me. “It’s going to be hard on me, but I’ll try. We’ll talk soon, yeah? Love you.”

“Love you too. Send my love to Caiti.”

I stab the button on the dash harder than necessary to disconnect the call and swipe a rogue strand of hair off my

forehead. A knock on my window jolts me into remembering Rhett's waiting outside. For a second, I got lost in absorbing what my brother said, but I shake off the guilt. Rhett's here to take me someplace fun.

We shared meals every night this week, and when he learned I didn't have to work Friday, he promised to take me on my first official Arrow Creek outing. I'm both nervous and excited to explore the area I'm quickly developing a fondness for.

I step out and tip my face to the warm sunshine. Rhett controls the reins on this outing, but I hope we remain outside. It's a perfect day to explore. Nights spent eating beneath the stars and sleeping in my car have instilled a new appreciation for the outdoors.

Rhett rakes his gaze over my body like a physical caress while inspecting my attire. For practicality purposes or his own interest, I can't be sure.

"Do you have a tee under your sweater? It might get hot in a few hours."

The rumble of his deep voice sends a thrill through me that I shake off. We're just friends. If we don't think about that night I let him bring me to a mind-numbing orgasm, that is. But even friends cross lines at some point or another, right? We just have to walk ourselves back to our respective sides.

I look down at my brown hiking boots, stylish but comfortable for walking. Taking in my black athletic leggings on the way up, I pinch my purple and gray flannel tunic away from my body. "I have something under this."

He nods. "Grab what you need for Ghost for the day. We'll take my Jeep."

I slip a silk hair tie over the top of my haphazard messy bun and do as he says, eager as ever for the day to commence.

Ghost gets to ride in the back. As I slide into the passenger seat, memories of what happened the last time I sat here pummels me. A peek from the corner of my eye reveals Rhett's oblivious to my thoughts as he busies himself with

firing up the vehicle. Hopefully, that means he doesn't notice my tiny squirm. A move I cover by buckling my seat belt.

“Don't think I forgot what happened the last time you were in my car.”

My skin flames red. “That's not a way to treat a freaking lady,” I snap. Half the ire stems from the instant sexual tension his words ignite.

The admonishment barely leaves my lips before he's crowding into my space. He catches me beneath the chin and glides his hand to rest in a ring around my throat.

“I haven't even come close to showing you just how well I know how to treat a lady.” He punctuates the words with a squeeze that steals my breath. Before he releases me, he drops a solid, singular kiss on my lips.

As quickly as it happened, he's returned to his seat and pulls out of the space as if he didn't just leave me reeling.

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TWENTY MINUTES LATER, we arrive at a designated parking lot at the base of a trail. Three wooden markers are visible from Rhett's Jeep. Curiosity instantly piques at the empty lot before me. We appear to have the outdoors to ourselves.

Rhett snags the bag of Ghost's items and a backpack from the back seat before climbing out. I follow suit, stopping to retrieve my dog, and meet him at the back. He relieves me of the leash, and I let him without protest. The two seem to be forming a bond that warms my insides. With a jerk of his head, he guides us in a different direction than the marked trails.

I keep the obvious question locked tight and follow his lead.

The nearly summer sun kisses my skin as we enter an unmarked trail. Worn, brown earth indicates we aren't the first to discover the path. Tall, green brush grows along the edges. Questions swirl as we hike, needing answers like how often

does he come here and how did he discover it? They remain silenced as I don't want to disturb the serenity.

Somewhere in the canopy of lush boughs above us, a bird tweets cheerily, serenading us with a delightful tune. Days spent cramped in an automobile have hindered my opportunities to enjoy Mother Nature fully. A brittle branch snaps beneath my boot as we hike. We're silent except for the huffs of our breath and the scrape of our shoes.

Following Rhett's lead provides ample opportunity to admire his well-fitted jeans. The denim clings to his glutes and wraps around powerful thighs. I don't know if he's an avid gym user or if the extermination business helps maintain his physical form, but it's clear from more than just his demeanor that he's a commanding force in all aspects of his life.

The thought reminds me of how he barreled into mine just a short week ago. Unyielding. And unavoidable. Like the evolution of a thunderstorm in my path. The cusp of friendship continues to bloom day by day, and I'm beginning to feel like I want him to stick around even when my situation sorts itself out. Friendship doesn't usually come easy to me, but if I truly want to stay in Arrow Creek, I'll need to build a support system for myself. Or risk Eric threatening to whisk me away again.

I nearly run into Rhett's back as he stops abruptly in my path. The palm not clutching Ghost's leash appears suddenly in my line of vision, and I trace the appendage up to the face of the man it belongs to. He appears to look at me from behind his shades with a hint of delight in his smile. I get the impression he knows I'm guilty of staring at his ass.

"Take my hand. It gets a bit rocky up ahead."

The invitation to touch him sends a thrill through my belly. One I'd be smart to ignore. This time of discovery is about me, and who that person is by herself without a partner. *Ahem*, a man. That doesn't mean I can't enjoy the company of said male species, but entertaining the idea of *zings* and *zaps* and *flutters* is a sure sign of derailment.

With a dry swallow, I place my hand in his. He encases my fingers in sturdy warmth and tugs me along.

The trail of dirt bleeds away to rocky ground the farther we climb. Excitement trills a different tune inside. Eager to reach our destination, I pick up the pace until I'm climbing at Rhett's side. He grins at me and twitches his ball cap lower over his forehead. I adjust my own sunglasses out of nerves and peer at my happy dog, who has her short tail up and nose to the ground. A pang echoes in my chest when I think about the daily walks we used to take around our town, but I quickly usher it away.

"You aren't chatty today." Rhett finally breaks through the barrier with a question I can't quite answer.

"Am I usually chatty?"

He playfully shakes my hand in his. "I wouldn't say you're the quiet type."

"You have me there."

"You looked to be enjoying your conversation on the phone earlier."

I nudge him with my shoulder. "Jealous?"

Illusions dance inside my head. A twitch of his hand. A slowing gait. I brush it away as nothing as we near our destination.

"Nah. I don't do jealousy."

A heavy awkwardness descends that I'm eager to break. "It was my brother checking in on me. Well, I called him, so technically, he doesn't get to hold it over my head that he had to check in."

This time, his hand twitch is intentional. "I'm glad you're staying in touch with your family."

I release a noisy exhale that has nothing to do with exertion. "I would be too, except he said my ex has been asking about me. I don't want to know that information."

The path narrows, and the number of stones in our way increases, necessitating a single line to navigate. Rhett doesn't let go of my hand.

“Was it a bad break?”

I think back on the remnants of my shattered heart. My time away has been good for my healing. For seeing the truth for what it really is. Reflecting where I went wrong and what I could have done differently.

I can't villainize myself for the choices I made during a difficult time. I also can't do the same to Tate, who only did his best to react to the crumbs I offered.

“The breakup itself wasn't bad. The circumstances are what made it unbearable. The timing...” I trail off.

Rhett pauses and glances back at me. He's taller than ever on the slight incline, imposing a shadow over the melancholy on my face.

“You don't have to tell me what you don't want to share. But I'm happy to offer an ear.”

I shake my head.

“Another time.” My smile feels forced when the reasons for my departure flood through the fences.

With a slight tug, he sets us into motion again. “Keep up. We're nearly there.”

Eager to see the view, I increase my pace.

“You know what they say about the best way to get over someone...” His husky voice infiltrates my insides.

“Is that an offer?”

“Yes.” The statement is punctuated by a tug as we reach our destination. Though Rhett stole my ability to focus on the land around us with his no-hesitation proposition. Not able to let it go, I step into his path. He can joke and tease all he wants to, but this might be a card I want to play someday, so I need the facts.

I lift my sunglasses to rest atop my hair. “Yes?”

One side of his sensual mouth lifts in a smirk. “What surprises you more—that I didn’t beat around the answer or that I’m happy to have you in my bed? Because I have to be honest, if you haven’t figured out I’m a no-strings kind of guy, you’ve missed something this week. And if you forgot the time I had my hand between your thighs, you *definitely* missed something.”

A guy who looks like Rhett and commands attention like Rhett does not have any problem finding a woman. I definitely picked up on that by the way he kisses and strummed me like a fine-tuned guitar.

I’m also not the type of woman who has a problem finding someone who wants me and makes that known. Contrary to the circumference of my thighs, men find me beautiful just as I am. Does every man find women like me attractive? No. Do I give a fuck? Also no.

“I’m not surprised by either. I’m simply seeking confirmation.”

He mirrors my action and removes his own shades to expose his eyes, promptly locking them on mine.

“Well then, consider this your confirmation. I’d like a repeat of the other day and the chance to do a hell of a lot more with you, no strings attached, whenever you need help scratching that itch. Understood?”

This must be that midday heat Rhett warned about before we left because my internal temperature has skyrocketed. Needing reprieve before I melt into a puddle, I pull my sweatshirt over my head to reveal the cropped tank top underneath. I can’t even answer his question before his gaze drops to my chest, and he groans at what he finds.

“When I asked if you had something under your sweatshirt, you could have warned me it was the size of a handkerchief.”

I wet my lips. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m perfectly covered.”



Rhett shakes his head. “I don’t know where you came from, but what little you leave to the imagination is a gift.”

In order to hide my grin, I give him my back and hustle to the end. As soon as the trees clear, I come to a complete stop.

Rhett

IN THE SPAN of a few seconds, I know that sharing my personal slice of heaven with Evie was the right idea. I watch her take in the ridges and rocks, the jutting cliffs, and the rushing river below with complete stillness. I stayed a few steps behind as she dashed ahead. I'm pretty sure she thought it was so I could admire her ass, which I did, but I also wanted an uninhibited view of this.

During our shared meals this week, I noticed Evie had an appreciation for the outdoors. The way she tips her face to the last rays of the sun and how she leans back on her hands to feel the gust of a breeze. How she makes sure we don't leave behind a single scrap of trash when we're finished eating. I wanted to give her something more than a dusty old dirt parking lot to spend her free days.

What's in store for either of us remains a mystery. Whether she'll disappear as quickly as she arrived or set down roots with someone she meets in Arrow Creek. I do know that this friendship is panning out to be exactly what I need, and I hope I can give her a little of what she's looking for too.

The gravel rolls beneath my shoes as I close the distance between us. I drag my index finger along the back of her smooth hand at her side, startling her from her admiration. She looks over at me, eyes light and free, before she continues closer to the edge. Ghost and I follow at a slower pace.

“I don’t think I’ve seen anything like it.” The breathless quality of her voice warms the frigid organ in my chest.

“It’s peaceful, that’s for sure.” Coming here for the first time all those months ago when I found out Nora preferred adultery to our marriage, I felt what she’s feeling. Now I spend those moments when life feels too painful to breathe up here in this serenity.

“My problems feel so small, so insignificant in the grand scheme of things.”

“They aren’t insignificant—”

She whirls and cuts me off. The glistening tears caught on her lower lids are startling.

“I wanted to have a baby.” She clenches her fists and looks away. “I wanted to have a baby more than I wanted anything else. *Anything*,” she repeats with vehemence. “I was willing to give up everything to make it happen. I *did* give up everything to make it happen, and I still failed.”

Puzzle pieces rain down around me. I’m not sure which one to pick up first to help put it together, or even if I can. The pain crackles in the air around us as she fights to keep her agony leashed.

“I went to appointments. I shut down my business to make the time. I did the research, and *he* didn’t even notice. I sank further and further into depression, and he didn’t have a clue what I was dealing with. Not once did he ask.”

She casts a corner piece my way, and I latch onto it like a lifeline.

“Why didn’t you tell him?”

“Because a defect is still a defect, even if you cover it with tape and glue.”

“Rosie.”

“The harder it got, the longer it went without him asking even that first question of *are you okay*, the more I didn’t want him to. It led to fights, and then more fights, and by then, I didn’t know how to tell him what I’d done and the hole I’d

dug myself into. I was planning to marry the man, and he didn't even notice I was about the slip beneath the surface and drown. That I'm still drowning. I still can't have a baby."

I close the distance between us in two strides, stopping close enough to see firsthand the tears cascading from her olive-green eyes.

"I left him in my mind before I found the courage to leave physically. What sort of partner sees the supposed love of their life struggling and doesn't even acknowledge it? It was like I was a burden to him, and it was easier to pretend I didn't exist. When he announced he couldn't go through with the wedding, all I felt was relief. I was relieved I didn't have to find a way to end it myself."

"That's an understandable reaction."

She shakes her head and drops her chin to her chest. "I wanted to have a baby so badly that I ran myself into debt. Not the nice kind of debt, like when you purchase something you really want and can enjoy it as you pay the hefty monthly bill because it's all worth the trouble. This is the kind of debt that has me living out of my car until I can save up enough money to pay it back."

My muscles lock so tight they cramp. I force myself to keep an even tone. "The bad kind."

"The really bad kind. The kind where I spent a ridiculous sum of money, but there wasn't a reward for the risk."

"How much are we talking?" I'm already tabulating ways to get Nora to end this charade so I can help Evie as soon as possible. I have more than enough in the bank to loan her some if it means she can sleep in a warm bed rather than her driver's seat.

"It doesn't matter. Even when I pay it back, my credit is already ruined from the late payments. I tried getting an apartment about two hours from home, and not a single one would approve my application with my dismal credit score. I ended up wasting money at a hotel while I tried to come up

with a plan. My brother ratted me out to my ex, who then came looking for me.”

“He knows you’re struggling with debt and just let you go a second time?” I want to snarl at the thought. I don’t know this guy from Adam, but he sounds like a fuckup.

She brushes her cheekbone with her thumb. “No,” she huffs. “Neither of them knows about the money. They’re best friends, my brother and Tate. They’ve both looked out for me since my parents died. He offered to let me come back and stay until I was on my feet. He thought I just couldn’t find an available apartment. But I couldn’t go back.”

“I don’t understand how he doesn’t know about the money.”

“I didn’t tell him. I used the cash we’d saved to pay for a surgery out of pocket, and I opened a credit card under my name to charge the wedding costs. I thought he’d figure it out, but when he asked about the missing cash, and I told him I used it for wedding deposits, he never questioned it.”

Ghost nudges my pant leg. I reach down to pet her without taking my eyes off Evie. “You have to tell them. Even if you don’t want them to help you, it might make you feel better.”

She walks closer to the edge. Seeing her surrounded by the open sky and nearby cliffs is breathtaking.

“For all my life, I’ve been taken care of. My parents were incredible up until I lost them. Eric and Tate were only eighteen at the time, and neither batted an eye about driving me around town and making sure nothing could ever hurt me. I went from living with my brother to living with Tate when we started dating. I’ve never had the chance to stand on my own two feet. And maybe I’m a bit reckless and don’t know what the hell I’m doing, but I need to figure it out one way or the other. This is my mess to clean up.”

I move closer to where she speaks her truth into the wide open and drop into a crouch at her side. Ghost plops to my left. I sit on the sun-warmed rocks, mulling over a response. While I understand her desire for independence, I can’t relate. I’ve

been financially independent since I turned twenty-one and received my inheritance from my grandfather. I learned to invest and grow that lump sum into a number over a million. That is, until Nora stepped in with her greedy hands.

“That may be true, but you can let someone care for you in the emotional sense. Your brother would want to know, even if you don’t want to tell your ex.”

“Who made you the emotional guru anyway?” She looks at her shoes and shakes her head. As the silence stretches, I sense she’s embarrassed.

“How about this. When I first found out my ex-wife cheated on me, I needed to get away from her for a while. I spent about two hours driving around the perimeter of the town before I realized I wasn’t actually getting anywhere besides pissed. I decided to find a place where I could shout or throw something without someone calling the cops. This area is a well-known hiking spot, and the parking lot was so busy I had to park near the back of the lot. That’s when I spotted this trail.” I lower my chin to my chest and hang my head as the memories of when I realized the dream was over rush in. “I’ve come back at least once a week since, even in the winter.”

When I look up, I find her staring down at me as if she’s soaking in each word. As if hearing about someone else’s pain makes her forget her own for just a second.

“You realize we’re going to share this space now, right? I mean, you can’t bring me here and not expect me to return.”

“Why not? We already sleep next to one another.”

The pink hitting her cheeks chases away some of the sadness. “We do not sleep next to each other, Rhett.”

“Near then.”

“In separate cars.”

“Parked close.”

“Parked an acceptable distance away.”

“This will sound strange being that we’re two strangers sharing a parking lot at night, but I feel a friendship

developing here, so I'm going to say it. If it didn't seem weird to the owner, I'd pitch us a tent in the middle of the parking lot just so I don't have to worry about you sleeping in your car all alone."

She slaps a hand against her chest. "Why that might be the friendliest thing you've said to me yet."

"I'm a friendly guy."

I snag her hand and yank until she nearly topples in my lap. Lucky for her, she catches herself. I really didn't think that through and nearly got slammed in the balls. "Sit and relax a while."

She pins me with a glare only inches from my face. "Your bossiness is going to get you into trouble."

"You like it." My gaze drops to her mouth.

She shrugs one uncovered shoulder. "No use in denying the obvious. It's too bad you have so much baggage," she teases with a sparkle in her eye.

I nearly drop my mouth open in affront. "Just for that, I'm going to stop calling you Rosie and start calling you suitcase instead."

"Only if I can call you nutcase."

"We are quite the pair."

She settles her back against the right side of my chest and sighs. The smell of her shampoo, something minty and fresh, reminds me of summer and crisp drinks to cut the heat.

"Can you hand me a drink?"

Without dislodging her from her position that I quite like, I slide the bag off my back to retrieve the snacks. I picked up some items while I waited for her to get back to the parking lot earlier. She takes the offered bottle of water. Before taking her own drink, she pours some into a bowl for her dog.

"If you aren't busy tomorrow, I'd like you to come hang out with my friends. We're helping them move, but you

wouldn't have to do any work. It might be nice to meet some more people in town."

"After that rant, you're willingly inviting me to hang out with you?" Her tone remains teasing, but I sense an undercurrent of insecurity.

I nudge her back with my shoulder. "Let's just say I don't mind being stuck with you any less than I did an hour ago."

"In that case, I refuse to go to a moving party and not help carry some boxes. I'm just sorry that my car's full of my own junk so I can't fit anything inside it. I'd love to come."

There's an easiness to her personality that's comforting. Nora was the type to need at least forty-eight hours' notice for anything. I couldn't even plan to meet Nathan at Calypso's without a drawn-out plan with a detailed start and end time. Evie takes my demands disguised as invitations in strides. If I'm being honest, I'd probably pester her in the parking lot until she agreed to come along. I may not have access to the money that can help her, but I do have access to time and good people.

I take a drink to clear my dry throat. "Perfect. They're going to love you."



Evie

“YOU NERVOUS?”

Rhett poises his fist to knock on his friend’s door as he takes one last look at me. I don’t know if the apprehension is written on my face or if he’s just observant enough. With Ghost’s leash clenched in one hand and my cleaning caddy in the other, I shake my head.

“Not nervous. Hoping I don’t end up in the way.”

“You won’t. You’ve already won them over with a dog and an extra set of hands.”

I crease my brows. “You can’t know that. They haven’t met my dog.”

His retort is silenced by the door swinging open.

“Oh my gosh! What are you doing here?”

Cami, my dog sitter, immediately holds out her hand to Ghost for a sniff before the gentle pit bull nudges her nose into her open palm. The sweet brunette brings her face closer for a slobbery doggy kiss.

“You two know each other,” Rhett states, not quite asking with an undercurrent of unease. What’s wrong with having met one of his friends already?

“She watched my dog while I met with a client.”

“And she’s the best dog ever! Even though she can’t hear me,” Cami coos and scratches beneath Ghost’s chin.

Rhett’s eyes meet mine for a silent beat before he cracks a smirk. “What’d I tell you?”

“I’m missing something,” Cami suddenly announces and rises from her crouch as she relieves me of the leash. “How do you two know each other?”

Rhett cocks his head, his smirk transforming into one full of sinful secrets. “It’s a small town. I thought I’d help her get familiar.”

“With what, your bed?”

“I don’t kiss and tell.”

My shoulders fall back as I stand tall at the implication. How *dare* he. Before I can say as much, Cami signals my dog to follow her and heads inside.

“I won’t keep you on the porch. We need all the hands we can get.”

Rhett moves to follow, but I snag his bicep in my hand. Shaking off how nice the rounded ball of hard muscle feels, I wait until I have his attention. Once again, his eyes meet mine, though this time, they’re guarded.

“What was that?”

A muscle twitches in his jaw. “It’s nothing.”

“Not nothing. Not when you make it seem like I’m just the current lay you didn’t have time to kick out of bed this morning. What *was* that?”

He flicks his attention to the open door and beyond. “I’ll share later.”

“Look at me.” I wait for him to return his wary gaze. “We’re all allowed to have secrets. I get that I stood on a mountain yesterday and bared more of mine than is probably normal, and I’m not asking you to do the same. But please don’t tarnish my character to people I’ve hardly met. It’s hurtful.”

Warm palms cup each of my elbows as his face falls into one of regret. Our bodies inch closer together on the small porch.

“My friends don’t know about where I’m staying, and I want to keep it that way until I sort my situation out. Rumors are that I make my home in many beds across town. It seemed like the easiest lie. I’m sorry. I didn’t think about how it’d make you feel or look to them. They’re used to me sleeping around.”

Brushing away the comment about many beds takes a surprising amount of willpower, considering he and I just met. I squeeze where my hand still rests. Seeing as I don’t want my own family to know where I am, I’d probably panic too.

“Apology accepted. Just don’t do it again. Cami’s been watching my dog for me, and I’d hate to lose that relationship because she thinks I’m just your flavor of the weekend.”

He tugs me closer and dips his head to level me with his gaze. “Never again. You have my word.”

The seriousness of his tone convinces me nearly as much as his handsome face. From this close, I can see the lines fanning from the corner of his eyes. His lower lip is slightly larger than the top one, but both are soft and kissable. The sharp line of his jaw entices me to run my fingers along it. Somehow, he still manages to keep his cheeks smooth of stubble while sleeping in his car and using a gas station bathroom.

He shakes both my elbows. “Let’s go. They’re probably already gossiping about us, and staying out here gives them more reasons not to stop.”

“Right,” I mumble, a little thrown off course. These past two days have packed an emotional punch, and it confuses the hell out of me. This across-country getaway is supposed to help me find myself, not find myself tied to someone else.

The moment we step over the threshold, the coos over my dog reach my ears. I instantly warm to the voices praising her. Too many people fear the breed without giving these dogs a

chance. Without having even met them yet, I feel like I've stumbled upon my niche of people.

Boxes are stacked high against the walls of a modern rambler. The cute place springs longing for somewhere to call my own. And maybe a touch of envy that it'll take years before I can manage to afford a place as cute as this. The size of the open-plan living room and kitchen would be perfect for a single woman like me. I can already picture setting up Ghost's crate in a spare bedroom. She's the only roommate I'll ever need.

That isn't entirely true. I was planning to marry a man before my world flipped on its axis. I don't even think the experience was enough to turn me into a cynic. Romantic hearts float around my head from time to time, and I remain open to experiencing the most swoon-worthy moments.

A few pop unannounced into my head. Rhett holding me after the scary experience with Dan the trucker and surprising me with a hot meal the same day I started with my first client. Inviting me on a hike with a gorgeous view and allowing me to simply express myself without him needing to fix me as if I'm broken.

I've known the man for one week, and he already appears to see the battle cracks in my heart and soothes them.

Cami returns to the room with my dog, and a pretty blonde follows her. The woman's face splits into a grin when she sees me. She steps from behind Cami to take me in from top to toe but loses my focus. The moment she moves from behind her friend, I see the small baby cradled in her arms.

My heart stutters at the cuteness overload. The sweet bundle peers with wide eyes and sucks contentedly on a chubby fist. The green fuzzy blanket swaddled around is clutched tightly in the other.

This town is perfect for me in as many ways as it's painful. This has to be like the frequency illusion—where you buy a new car and then immediately start seeing the make and model everywhere. The last year of my life has been filled with such a desire to have a baby, and now I'm surrounded by them.

“Hi, I’m Kiersten.” The blonde steps closer with her hand outstretched, forcing me to divert my attention away from the little one.

“Hey. I’m Evie.” I can’t quite help my gaze from reverting back to the baby in her arms. She notices the shift and calls me out on it.

“This little guy is Cedric.”

“He’s beautiful.” My voice fills with awe, and a rush of embarrassment follows. Rhett’s warm palm settles reassuringly on the low curve of my back.

The new mom beams and glances down at her little one. “You are beautiful, aren’t you?” She strokes his cheek as she coos in a baby voice. “Even your stinky little poos are beautiful.”

“He’s getting over his first bout of baby constipation,” Cami adds helpfully. “She’s not normally this weird.”

Rhett coughs behind me, but I hear the low rumble he fails to disguise completely.

Kiersten rolls her eyes. “Weird is relative. I don’t have to explain to anybody why I am the way I am.” She aims a beaming smile at me. “But I already have the feeling we’re going to get along just fine, even if I am weird.”

“I don’t think you’re weird.” She doesn’t appear the type to need confirmation, but I give it anyway.

She shifts her gaze to Rhett. “Love her already! So tell me the story. Are you two an item or just sharing sheets?”

*Oh my God!*

“Kiersten!” Cami’s defense of us is loudest, but I swear Rhett grumbles from behind me.

“His highly known reputation isn’t a deterrent. We’re just friends.” I rock side to side.

Her brows pinch together as she flicks her gaze back and forth between the two of us. “Hmm. Yeah, I’ve done just

friends.” She gives the happy baby in her arms a little jostle. “This is my souvenir.”

My next inhale turns sharp at her words as the sting of infertility settles in.

“Please don’t refer to my son as a souvenir like you just went to Mexico and won a wet T-shirt contest.”

The new voice belongs to another attractive man. He has to be about six feet tall, built—if his biceps are any indication—with a length of brown hair that’s disarranged perfectly on his head. His eyes are adoring as he shifts the box in his hands in order to lean in to kiss his girlfriend or wife on the cheek.

“Not that I’d mind seeing you in a wet tee.”

The hand Rhett placed on my back moves to the left a few inches and squeezes my hip. The slight pressure encourages me to loosen the muscles in my back.

“Unless you two are ready for another baby, let’s turn the heat down a notch, okay?” Cami says with a smile. “Speaking of babies, where’s yours today?”

“His mom asked for an extra day. I’ll have him tomorrow instead,” Rhett answers in a tone that stems additional questions.

Cami directs her gaze at me. “Enough standing in the doorway. Let’s get you a drink. You can meet my hot hunk of a man, and then we can let them get back to manly stuff while we take care of the children.”

“Do you have more kids?” I ask, glancing around as if I’m about to be ambushed by more of the very thing I’m trying to leave behind.

“Nah. I just have Evelyn, though I won’t say never to more. Kiersten just has Cedric for now, but the way those two can’t keep their hands to themselves, I’m betting she’ll be pregnant again in a month or two. By plural, I included your dog child because she’s just perfect.”

The heaviness wafts away, and I smile. “Thank you. I didn’t mean to crash in on your efforts, though. I plan to work

too.” I hold up the cleaning caddy in my right hand.

Cami drops Ghost’s leash to allow her to explore and hooks me through the elbow. As she drags me away, Rhett’s fingertips drift along my lower back until he’d have to physically follow to keep them intact. The look in his eyes is a mixture of heat and concern as I turn to share a content smile over my shoulder.

I’ll think about that later.

“If you want to lend your efforts to the task, I won’t be the one to stop you. But I will make sure you are properly liquored while you do it. If you drink, that is. If not, ignore me. No pressure whatsoever,” Cami says as she tows us to a halt at the kitchen island.

“I’ll have a drink, sure.” I can’t even remember the last time. When we were trying to have a baby, I cut out anything that might even remotely hurt my chances, even if it was just in my head and not proven by science.

“Wine, seltzer, vodka soda, or something stronger?” She waggles her eyebrows.

“Have a strong one for me.” Kiersten pouts.

“I keep telling her she has options.” Cami rolls her eyes.

“We don’t pump and dump in this house. My milk is liquid gold, thank you very much.” Kiersten looks at me. “I only have a drink if someone’s babysitting and the little man has a bottle.”

At the mention of the baby, my attention drops there. “I think that’s inspiring. The things mothers are willing to do for the sake of their children’s well-being.”

The silence raises my head just as the two women exchange a look. I’m guessing this isn’t the only time they’ve had to make sacrifices for their kids.

Cami clears her throat. “What can I get you?”

“Seltzer is great. Thank you.”

The crack of the can punctures the quiet, and I glance around the nearly empty room. This one appears to be fully packed up and ready to be cleaned. “Mind if I start here? You two can sit and keep me company.”

“Psh. Give me a sponge. We can take turns holding the baby.” Cami ties her hair into a messy bun.

There will be no baby holding for me. Helping with Tommy at my client’s house was one thing. I couldn’t get started until his mother came back. But this one is snuggled right where he belongs in his mother’s arms.

I fill the sink with my cleaning solution to start wiping down the cabinets and fridge. “Do you want to take the cabinets or the stove?” I ask Cami, who stands at the ready with a pair of yellow rubber gloves on as she drinks her own canned seltzer.

Her face contorts into a grimace. “Cabinets, please. I hate cleaning my own oven, and I’m scared of what hers looks like.”

“Then you’ll love to see how easy it is when I do it. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t think an oven exists that doesn’t need a little elbow grease, but I have the secret weapon.”

We set out to our tasks. Cami takes over the sponge from the sink and wipes out all the open spaces while I work on degreasing the hood fan, stovetop, and oven. We make quick work together even with time spent giggling like girls and enjoying our drinks. I discover Cami is a paramedic with Kiersten’s husband, Nathan, and Kiersten is a 911 dispatcher. The three of them have been friends for over a decade.

It doesn’t take long for a familiar pang to remind me I’m alone in this world. I don’t have a tribe or a girl gang. I didn’t even leave friends behind. They all drifted over the years as they settled down and started families while I was steps behind.

Sitting in this room with two women who are clearly good friends brings another longing. I vow to myself I will find this



in Arrow Creek if I settle down here or somewhere else. A solid friend or two to keep me grounded.

I make a mental note to thank Rhett again for bringing me along. For reminding me that all hope isn't lost for my life at twenty-five. That I can find things to fulfill me even though I can't have what I thought mattered most.

"Are you just super well-stocked on cleaning supplies and knowledge?" Cami breaks us out of a silent moment and leans her hip against the edge of the counter she just scrubbed.

"I used to run a cleaning business back home. I'm hoping to start one up here to help me get settled in."

"You know, this isn't so bad. When I set out on my own and moved here, I never would have thought of cleaning houses for income. It's genius!" Cami rinses her sponge in the sink.

I rub my forearm across my forehead. "If I can build up enough clients, it should be a pretty steady career."

"Is that where you went when I watched Ghost? I'm sorry if I'm prying. Tell me to stop."

"She's nosy, but she means no harm," Kiersten adds.

A smile touches my lips. "That was my very first client. Thank you again, by the way. It helped so much. Now I need to figure out a more permanent solution."

"Oh no, you don't. We're happy to watch her anytime. Between myself, my daughter, and my husband, we can have you covered."

"Did someone summon me?" A deep voice echoes from the hall, followed closely by another incredibly handsome man appearing in the doorway. He also has long strands on top of his head, but instead of a rich brown, the hair is nearly black. Creases surround his eyes from either years of laughter or days in the sun. Judging by his tan, I'd guess the latter. His broad shoulders nearly fill the doorframe as he looks down at Cami adoringly. She moves straight into his chest.

“I was just telling my new friend Evie we’d be happy to watch her dog anytime she needs.”

At the mention of my name, his attention pins me to the floor as the most piercing blue eyes I’ve ever seen come to rest on mine.

What. Is. In. The. Water. Here.

He jerks his head to indicate the space behind him. “Met your dog back there. She’s sweet. We’d be glad to have her.”

“That’s really kind. Thank you both.”

“I’m Law,” he adds.

“Evie.”

“Been hearing about you, Evie. Nice to meet you.” He rocks back on his heels.

My curiosity is piqued about what Rhett’s been saying. Growing up with my brother and Tate, I know guys can gossip just as good as women can. I can’t imagine what all Rhett would have to say after knowing me for only a week.

With a kiss on Cami’s forehead, he retreats as quickly as he arrived.

“Would it be weird to be your new friend and also hire you? Because you’re doing a kick-ass job, and I have a new house to clean before I can move into it.” Kiersten brushes her fingers along the cheek of the now sleeping baby. I quickly move my attention back to her face.

“Definitely not weird. I’d be thrilled, actually. I can run back later with a contract, and we can discuss rates.”

“Oh, bring one for me too.” Cami tosses her sponge in the sink. We’ve finished everything but the floors, which come last. “Lord knows teenagers, even the best ones, clean like crap.”

“I’ll take your word for it and bring another contract.”

Rhett

THE MOMENT I see my son's face, a load lightens from my chest. The toddler beams in my direction and thrusts his hands in front of him, wiggling to be set down. Nora's scowl is nothing out of the ordinary as she finally acquiesces to his demand and places him on his feet. The second he's on solid ground, it's go time for the little guy, and he runs my way.

I scoop him up, my first embrace in a week, and hold him extra close as he tucks his head beneath my chin. My eyes slowly close as I soak him in.

"Hey, big man. Daddy missed you." I ignore the tap of Nora's heels coming closer.

"Dadda hugs!" he says with enthusiasm, putting together a sentence I haven't heard before.

Fuck. My eyes pop open at this new development I've missed. I want to ask her if she's spending a lot of time with him. If she's reading to him every night to help build his vocabulary. If she talks to him as she goes about her day so he can hear words being spoken when it's just the two of them at home. We've argued many times about putting him into daycare for the development. It would help him to be around other adults and kids, but she's refused. I'm skeptical that her refusal isn't simply out of spite. Another of many angles I'm trying to work out in our custody agreement.

She stops two feet away and stares, giving the impression she's working up the nerve to say something. Too bad for her, I'm not interested in her brand of deception and manipulation.

"Bag, please."

She clutches the strap slung across her chest tighter as if I'm about to physically rip it away.

"Can we talk?"

My body locks in order not to rear back at the asinine question. "Not without my lawyer present."

"I won't take much of your time, but I think we have some things to work out."

"No shi...duh." I catch myself before tarnishing the little ears in proximity. "We have to work everything out because of this little game of yours."

"It's not a game," she hisses quietly, too proud to make much of a scene in a public place. This works in my favor to subdue a full-blown argument. Not that I have much of a reputation to tarnish in this town. I did that already by bed-hopping.

"You have the papers from my lawyer?"

"You know I do."

"And do you agree to the terms yet?"

"No, I—"

"Then I don't know what more you want. It's laid out. It's fair, and you're getting way more than you deserve for what you did. You know that's a fact. So unless you're here to tell me you're accepting or you're walking away from this fight, either of which will be fine by me, we have nothing to discuss until we get in front of a judge."

She rears back as if I forced her to, and that hurts like a punch to the gut. I'm not the type of man to intimidate a woman to get what I want. Her display reveals even more things wrong with our relationship. She's never had a reason to fear me, and she doesn't have one now.

“I don’t want to do this with a judge. I just want to talk.”

“That’s bull. We’ve had mediation to talk, and you refuse to budge an inch. I don’t know what else I can throw at you to make you just go away. Now give me the bag.”

The black duffel hits the floor with an audible thud, drawing attention from the front desk. I fight against remarking at her dramatic flair.

“I’ll be here at noon to pick him up tomorrow.”

Give her a damn inch, and she’s still ungrateful.

When she asked to push my day to allow her mother to see him while she visited from out of town, I should have said no. For the sake of our son, I agreed to the adjustment. A lesser man would throw that fact in her face with the attitude she can’t help but kick around, but I pride myself on being a good man.

Without a word, I snag the strap of the bag and head toward the elevator bank.

“Sucker?”

I look down at my son in surprise. “Did you learn a new word, bub?”

He places a chubby palm against my stubbled cheek and turns my face to his. Those big, brown eyes bore into my identical ones. If I had a free hand, I’d rub the ache from my sternum.

“Sucker...pwease?”

Another sentence. He’s remembered that I started carrying suckers a few weeks ago to have on hand as a treat. Living out of a vehicle leaves few options for storing perishable snacks. While I try to take him out during our time together, it’s nice to have something on hand. He’s growing more by the day, and I’m forced to miss half of it. The bitter pill sticks in my throat. I swallow the lump down before I can respond.

“Sure, bud. Did you eat all your lunch?”

His sandy hair flies as he nods vigorously, eliciting a chuckle I didn't know I could conjure after that discussion with his mom. We step off the elevator on our floor, and I set him on unsteady legs to toddle down the hall.

My phone dings just as I reach our room. First, I fish out the key, and then I grab my phone. Tommy smacks my leg as he waits for the door to open. I hold it wide so he doesn't get pinched on his way inside. Another rich laugh warms me as he immediately plops onto his diapered butt and tries pulling his shoes off.

"You got it. Pull harder," I encourage, not ready to step in and take over the task. My phone buzzes again, a reminder of the unread text. A spurt of irritation strikes. I refuse to waste time on my phone during the short intervals I have my son.

*Evie: Want to meet for dinner at 5?*

Visions of Evie sleeping alone in the gas station parking lot infiltrate my thoughts. She didn't come close to crossing my mind when Nora asked me to switch days. Realizing this is the first time with my son since I met Evie hits like a ton of bricks. The protective man in me is half a second from calling to demand she meets us here.

I drop my gaze to the little boy near my feet with one shoe still on. I can't do that to him. This is our time together. It wouldn't be fair to bring over a woman I've known for only a week.

The need to check in with her demolishes any doubt, and I find myself hitting the call button before I can think it through.

"Hey." Her breathless voice comes across the line after a single ring.

"I saw your text. Are you at work?"

"Yeah. I have a couple of hours left, but thought I could ask Cami to watch Ghost a little longer so we could grab a bite to eat in town instead of eating in one of our cars tonight." The humor floats clearly over the line. Her ability not to wallow in her situation astounds me at times. Most women I know would

have a hard time escaping their own self-pity, but not Evie. I'd even say she's enjoying this adventure she's on.

"I can't." I pause to watch Tommy climb to his feet and wander across the room to the windows. The air-conditioner unit blows his hair from his eyes. A belly-aching giggle bursts free. "I won't be there tonight. I have my son."

"Oh! Don't let me keep you from him. I'll see you when I see you."

"Evie, wait. Where are you sleeping tonight?" Fuck. The obvious question slips free.

"I'll be at the gas station." Her puzzled response comes across as I would have imagined. Where else would she be sleeping? I prop a hand on my hip and drop my chin to my chest, eyes aimed at the worn blue carpet.

"Don't go until after you pick up Ghost. And don't shower tonight. Or if you need a shower, I can ask one of the girls if you can stop by their house. Better yet, just ask Cami if you can use hers. Tell her yours is broken or something—"

"Rhett—"

"You still have your knife? Make sure it's close when you go to sleep."

"Rhett—"

"Maybe you should just come here. We have an extra bed," I muse aloud.

"Rhett! I'm going to be fine."

As I shake my head, my hand leaves my hip to stroke the back of my neck. Heat from embarrassment creeps up. "You are, aren't you?"

I'm about certain I can picture the cock of her hip when she says, "This isn't my first night out alone."

A huff of laughter precedes my breath. "I'm sorry if I'm being weird. Now that I know you, it's hard to leave you out there alone. I wouldn't do it for any of my closest friends. I

feel... guilty sleeping in a hotel room while you're in your car."

"We're as safe as ever out here. You need to spend that energy on your son. Don't worry about me, okay?" Her soothing tone just makes me wish even more I could be near her. To search her face for signs of a lie.

"Tomorrow, I'm buying you pancakes for lunch to make up for it."

It's her turn to laugh. "Whatever helps you sleep better tonight."

"More than I'd rather admit, it's going to be hard."

Her sharp intake of breath is audible. Before she can respond, the sound of a door slamming comes through the line.

"Gotta go. My client just pulled in."

Before I can issue any more instructions for her safety, the connection severs.

Tommy bangs on the air conditioner unit. "Sucker?"

The smile cutting my face is instantaneous. "Yeah, bub." I reach into my pocket and pull out the small selection. "Which color?"

He runs over and jabs a finger at one in the middle.

"Green. Good choice."

"Geen," he repeats with a bob of his head.

"That's right." I scoop him into my arms and set him in the center of the bed. "Now sit nice and eat your sucker. When you're done, we can go for a swim."

The easy access to a pool each week has been a blessing in disguise. The little guy loves the water, and I've spent more than one summer on a boat or a beach. Teaching him water safety at a young age will only expand our activities when we're together.

And having something to occupy my mind will quiet thoughts about Evie.



Evie

THE PATIO at the back of Calypso's glows from string lights dangling from the awning and lanterns lit in the center of the square tables. The balmy breeze is welcome after the heat of today. Ghost moves close to my side as we enter the black wrought-iron fence and walk the perimeter to a table near the back with a single occupant. I'm thankful Rhett chose someplace with a patio to eat dinner tonight so my dog could come, but the fiery frustration inside will determine if our evening can be salvaged.

He spots me before I'm close enough to kick out the leg of his chair and send him sprawling to the ground. Not that I'd take things that far. The image in my head of the action is enough to stretch a thin smile across my face. His reciprocating smirk has a flash of guilt stabbing me. The genuine pleasure at the sight of my appearance douses the heat a little.

"Cami said the two of you had a really nice time today." He rises to pull out my chair. The legs scrape against the paved patio stones. He's making it hard to remain mad.

I tap Ghost into position to lie beneath the table. She flops onto her side—legs stretched out, nose up, and tongue lolled—as the breeze blows across her face. My dog is more relaxed than me. Rather than lean across the table into his face like I want, I remain upright with my hands loose at my sides.

“Did you tell Cami I live out of my car?” The question grinds out with the force required to keep my tone controlled.

“What?” Rhett’s brows slash.

I wet my lips with my tongue. “I asked if you happened to let it slip to your friends that I’m homeless and poor.”

“I didn’t say it quite like that.” The wind brushes a lock of hair across his forehead, which he hastily swipes away.

“Chess is the only game I like to play, Rhett.”

“I’m not playing games.”

I press my weight into my heels to keep from stomping my foot. My nostrils flare. “Did you or did you not state, imply, or otherwise to your friends that I’m hard up for cash?”

He holds my gaze steadily. “I mentioned that you only had a client or two and were in the early stages of getting your business off the ground.”

If I ask another question, it’s not going to come out as nicely. I might actually growl like a damn animal.

“And I may have said that you were saving for a place to stay,” he finishes softly.

“You did not,” I grind out.

An approaching waitress buys him time with his response. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“A vodka soda with extra limes,” I respond without losing eye contact with Rhett. Now would be a particularly good time to be equipped with lasers because I’m not sure he’s grasping how upset I am about this.

“Whiskey, neat. Put it on my tab.”

A noise gets strangled in the back of my throat at the audacity.

The waitress leaves, but the unspoken revelation lingers between us.

“So is sleeping in your Jeep in an empty parking lot just a hobby?”

Rhett's torso rears back as if I struck him. "You know it isn't," he growls.

Tired of standing, I hook my foot around the leg to my chair and yank it out, dropping heavily into the seat. "I don't need you to pay for my drink. Thanks to whatever you told your friends, I have enough cash for the entire week."

"You're getting it all wrong. I think we need to step back and regroup before things get too far gone."

"I get that we're different, you and me." I go on as if he hadn't spoken. "You have money. How much? I don't need or care to know. The status of your situation has a clear expiration date, and you're holding on until you reach it. I get that, can appreciate it even, but we're not the same."

"I know we're not the same."

"Then I figured you'd appreciate that I also don't require charity. I work hard. I enjoy putting in the effort. Handouts aren't my endgame here."

Rhett reaches across the table and places his hand on top of mine. The warmth seeps through and instantly cools some of my ire. I wouldn't admit it out loud, but I miss this. The physical touch of another human being, whether friendly or something more. What I wouldn't give for a simple hug from my brother right now.

Crap. The thought stings my eyes with unshed tears.

"We're not the same, but we're alike in more ways than you realize."

"Can you explain to me what you would do if your client handed you a stack of cash worth four times the work you did that day? Because of her alone, I can afford food for an entire month." That's not including the high wage Nora's been paying me. I'm nearly saved up for a month's rent already.

His thumb strokes my knuckles and reminds me we're still touching. I pull away and turn my head to the side, scratching the side of my nose with my thumb to disguise a snuffle.

“I can see why that would make you uncomfortable, but I hope you accepted it. They’re great, well-meaning people. And they want to be your friends.”

The waitress delivers our drinks. I take a hefty sip while I wait for her to retreat from earshot.

“Are you embarrassed by me?” I ask the question gnawing my insides. What else explains why he felt the need to explain my circumstances to his friends. He could easily play the part of the brave knight riding in on his four-wheeled horse to save the plus-sized damsel in poverty.

“Are you crazy? I’m enamored by you. Embarrassment hasn’t even come close to crossing my mind.”

I bring my icy glass to my lips and peer over the rim. “I like you too.”

“Rosie.” His heated gaze drops to my lips.

Right as things start to return to our normal, we’re interrupted by a busty brunette in a black body con dress. She leans her weight on her palm and injects herself into Rhett’s eye line. Curious to how this will play out, I lean back and take another refreshing sip of my crisp drink.

“Hey, Rhett,” she coos in a voice rife with familiarity.

“Melanie.” He greets her politely. If I were her, I’d take his lack of further interest as a cue to fuck right off. Rhett’s eyes meet mine across the table, over the hills of her breasts. The awkwardness forces a bubble of laughter to rise that I disguise with a sip.

“I haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Been busy.” He directs his answer at me.

Her body hovers closer to him as if drawn by a magnet.

“Never stopped you before.” She runs her hand down his arm to punctuate her throaty mumble.

An eye roll here should suffice, but it doesn’t. He and I are just friends. Friends who’ve been intimate once, sure, but still friends. I have no right to feel anything about this woman

leaning her giant tits across the table I'm about to consume a meal at, but for some reason, I want to grab her by the hair and yank her out of my space.

"You're being rude." Rather than resort to physical violence, I use my words.

"I wasn't talking to you." For the first time since she arrived, she acknowledges my existence by turning only her head. Her critical eyes rake from my haphazard messy bun down to my plain white tee. The comparison is stark in her eyes, revealing her opinion that there is none.

"Now that I have your attention, I'll say it again. You're being rude."

"You can have him back after I'm finished." She turns back to Rhett, but I'm far from letting her linger a second longer.

"Honey, if you want to sleep with him, that's fine. Leave your number, and he'll call you later, but right now, I'm about to have some dinner after a long day at work, and you're in the way of that."

Silence envelops the three of us, blanketing our table from the rest of the patio. Rhett breaks it first.

"Don't bother expecting a call." He snags his drink. As the glass contacts his lips, his eyes burn into mine over the rim.

Melanie straightens hastily. "You're a player, Rhett." She turns to me with a glare. "Enjoy him for the second you have him. He's great in bed but will leave you the next morning."

I consume my drink to silence myself rather than deliver a response. Once she's out of earshot, I set the slippery glass back on the table.

"She was charming," I say with faux sweetness. Really, I'm trying to tamp down the green dragon taunting me that she's had something I might want to have, and she had no problem rubbing it in my face.

"I know how to pick 'em." He raises his glass in a mock salute.

“Are there many more former conquests lingering around, waiting for me to go to the bathroom so they can get in your pants?” With a hand shading my brow, I scan the patio.

His left eyebrow quirks. “Jealous?”

“Merely gauging how much trouble follows you around.”

“Why? Thinking about finding your own way into my pants?”

One shoulder raises in a shrug as I blush. “You’ve already been in mine.”

“I’d like to get in them again.” His voice is abrasive and deep. I wrap my fingers around my glass and slide them along the cool condensation.

“Let’s go back to our earlier argument. We weren’t finished.”

“I think we’re done.”

“Maybe I have more to say.”

“I’m starting to think fighting with me is your form of foreplay. Can’t say that it disappoints me, Rosie.”

My obvious blush spreads to my chest. “What makes you think that?”

Rhett’s hands grip the edges of the table as he rises slightly from his chair. Up close, I can see exactly how dilated his pupils are, and a waft of his whiskey breath dances across my skin. A shiver races down my spine.

“Because...” He begins in a deep purr that wraps around me like a caress. “Fighting with you gets me really fucking hard. So hard that I can’t help but imagine how wet you are.”

A gasp gets caught in my throat as he drops back into his seat with a smirk.

“That’s what I thought.” He takes a swig of his drink and eyes me over the rim.

“Your game does nothing to lessen my appetite after a long day at work. I’m starving.”

“Me too.” The heat in his gaze implies he craves something other than food.

“Buddy, I don’t think you understand what you’re playing with.”

“Oh, I understand perfectly. Town player, remember?” He flicks his wrist to indicate our most recent intruder.

“And my situation is temporary.”

Through all the banter, this line appears to trigger him. He straightens from his relaxed position.

“You’re planning to leave?”

I swirl a finger through the condensation on my glass and shake my head. “No. Not yet at least. Out of the two of us, you’re the one who’s done the settled down thing. I ran away from commitment, so clearly, that’s not what I’m looking for.”

He snorts and takes another drink. “Oh, no. One and done for me. I’ll never settle down again.” He tips his glass in my direction. “For you, Rosie, I’m happy to double-dip.”

I roll my eyes. “How very gracious of you, Rhett.”

Our heated staring contest is broken by the waitress. “Are you two ready to order?”

“I’ll have a buffalo chicken wrap with a side of fries. And another drink, please.” My cell begins ringing from my back pocket. “Okay if I grab this?” I rise from my seat and fish out my phone.

“Stay. It’s fine.” He turns back to the waitress as I answer my brother’s call.

“Hey.” I drain my glass to wash away any residual throatiness. I face the back of the patio to block out the noise.

“Sounds like you’ve ventured out into the public. I think this is the first time I’ve called and heard background noise.”

I laugh. I’m usually alone in my car when we talk, but I don’t reveal that. “I’m just grabbing a bite to eat after work.”

“Yeah? How’s it going? Are you building a steady base?”

I think back to the five clients I have, two of which are directly related to Rhett, one is Nora, and the other two I found through a social media post I made. “Things are picking up.”

Hearing my brother’s voice in my ear soothes a part of me that’s been missing him.

“Are you ready for a visit yet? You know Caiti’s getting antsy. She says without our own kids to take care of, we have to travel before this time in our life is over. I know she wants to see you.”

My heart judders behind my ribs. I never told my brother about the struggles I had with Tate, and at this moment, I regret it for his absence of compassion around the topic. The emotions throw me so much that I don’t filter my response.

“If you’re looking for adventure, Arrow Creek isn’t it.”

“And what state is Arrow Creek in?”

Fuck it all to hell.

“Forget I said it. I didn’t mean to share that.” Panic forces my voice higher.

“You’re doing a terrible job of convincing me not to hop on a plane right now. What are you trying to hide?”

“I’m not hiding anything. I just don’t have time to make a visit fun right now.”

“It doesn’t have to be fun. We can stop by for a day or two and then catch a flight to see Tate.”

Something touches my calf beneath the table, and I swear I jump a foot. The surrounding sounds filter back into focus, bringing along with it Rhett’s concerned stare.

“*You okay?*” he mouths.

I nod.

“Look, my food’s here, and I want to eat while it’s hot. Can we discuss this later?” The lie rolls out easily as the urge to retreat closes in.

“Sure,” my brother says, giving up with surprising ease.



“I miss you. I’m really glad you called.”

“Me too.”

I hit the end button. My phone clatters noisily against the metal table.

“What do you need?”

Rhett’s voice pulls me from diving too deep into the well of self-disappointment.

“A time machine, so I can go back and not tell my brother the name of this town.” I brush away a strand of hair the breeze blows into my eye.

“What are you worried about? It’s me, isn’t it?”

I can’t help but laugh. “I can’t imagine he’ll be too happy that the only friend I’ve made so far is someone who looks like you because he’s protective like that, but no. I’m worried he’s going to put up a fight to get me to leave with him.”

He fiddles with the short plastic straw sticking from his glass. “That’s not so bad.”

“We’ve talked about this. I don’t even know why I’m going over it again. It’s not like it matters. He can’t make me leave. And you can’t either,” I tack on the end. “I take that back. He might be thrilled I’ve found someone like you who wants me to take the easy way out.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

I hold up my palm and puff out a sigh.

“I know. I’m over the arguing tonight. Can we just enjoy our meal?”

“If that’s what you need, sure. But I’m paying to feed you. Not because you can’t, but because you’re stressed, and I want to do this for you.”

I give my empty glass a sad face. “Luckily for you, I’m all out of fucks.” I manage to remain expressionless and lean back in my chair.

“Luckily for you, I’m not.”

He winks.

Oh, my.

I crack a wobbly grin.

One thing's for certain out of the turmoil of today. He sure knows how to pull a woman out of a funk.

Rhett

I SIT behind the desk in my office a few days after the incident at Calypso's, frustrated that I can't seem to stop thinking about it. Hell, I can't seem to stop thinking about Evie most of the time, but it's not only her. It's Melanie. And Mallory. And the goddamn reputation I let myself build during a destructive spiral. Trying to decipher if Evie means something more to me is hard as hell. These other women provided a distraction and a good time—a mutual one—but with Evie, I'm enjoying the more.

She's the first woman I've spent considerable time with since splitting with Nora, and it's barely been two weeks. That's hardly substantial in a way that I know I need more.

More time.

More laughs.

More conversations beneath black skies and twinkling stars.

But the thorns of doubt poke and prod and nestle inside me while taunting.

Do I need more, or am I holding out for the opportunity to fuck her?

I worry that over the past year, I've lost the core of who I am. I'm not the guy who screws everything with a set of tits

even though that's precisely what I've been doing. Turning into that man was easy when I was bogged down with a hurricane of pain. Returning to who I used to be seems damn near impossible now that I've tarnished myself in a way I can't erase. My soul will wear these stains for the rest of eternity.

I want to move away from the person I've been, the one who enjoys a good woman and a good time, usually with a load of booze to do it. What sort of role model am I for Tommy if I have a constant train of women parading through my life?

The question remains bouncing around my skull.

*Where does this leave Evie?*

I groan and settle my head into my hands. I could add the label of liar if I said I didn't want to screw her into next week. Somewhere other than the back seat of my car would be nice. If this office hadn't been owned by my grandfather, I'd consider bringing her here, but that wouldn't make me much different than my soon-to-be ex-wife. Office gossip and security cameras would out my behavior in an instant.

I can't even sleep here out of respect for the man who raised me. He'd undoubtedly understand, being the type of man to love hard work and sacrifice. Knowing my situation is temporary is all the more reason to keep it under wraps and not have to dodge questions I don't have answers to.

Thoughts of Nora completely douse my sexual desire in an instant. She makes me perpetually cold and my dick soft.

My cell vibrates loudly on my desk, and Evie's name illuminates the screen.

"Hey there," I answer immediately, noting the way my mood lightens. I shuffle a stack of papers to the other side of my desk and out of my way.

A pause lingers. "Hey." The word is punctual.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't even know why I'm calling to ask you this." Her tone alights something primal within me.

“Ask me what?”

Wind sounds across the line as if she’s on the move.

“Did you... You didn’t by chance rough up a trucker?”

My chest expands. “Are you asking or seeking confirmation?”

“I don’t know. I guess confirmation. I wouldn’t have called if I didn’t suspect it was you.”

“He threatened you,” I state plainly to conceal the contempt. Thinking back to finding Dan in her space injects anger through me. Comfort only comes by reliving the crack as I connected my knuckles with his haggard face.

“I was okay. He left me alone.”

“Not originally.” My tone darkens. I cross the room and shut the door to my office. “He lingered. I gave him a little motivation to get out of town.”

She snorts. “A lot of good that did because I just saw him.”

I lean back in my chair and gaze at the ceiling, focusing on the steady thrum of my pulse. “Did he approach you?”

“No.”

“That’s because I told him if he got close again, I’d make sure he was never found.”

“Why would you do that?”

That’s the million-dollar question.

She keeps at me. “He looked pretty bad, even though the bruises have aged a few days. How’s your hand?”

I flex my fingers and feel only a lingering ache. “It’s fine,” I answer softly.

“I don’t understand why you didn’t just kick his ass that first night. Why wait and seek him out when I already made my point?”

“Witnesses and cameras,” I answer honestly. “If my ex-wife got wind, she’d label me as violent before I could blink.”

“Exactly!” she spouts off. I start talking before she can get too wound up. Though she’s sexy when riled, and I wouldn’t mind the entertainment.

“I’m the only one you have here. I couldn’t let it go without making sure you’d be safe if I wasn’t around. And I’m glad I did because when I spend time with my son, I have to leave you alone in that parking lot.”

“I told you I’d be fine.”

“Say thank you and let it go,” I plead, not wanting to dig more than surface deep.

A beat. Then a whisper. “Thank you.”

My shoulders slump as the tension eases, but her breathy thanks directs the tension to the place below the belt.

“I can’t just let it go, though.”

“Evie,” I groan. “Leave. It. Be.”

“When will you be back?” The creak of her car door sounds across the line.

Lowering the phone from my ear, I check the time. “A couple of hours still. My office is a forty-five-minute drive out of town, and I have a stack of work on my desk I’ve been avoiding.”

“Hmm. So you’re saying I couldn’t just pop by for lunch?”

My tongue swipes my lower lip, and a rough chuckle slips free. “I’m afraid not. Sounds like you have something in mind. Why don’t you share with the class?”

“I never got to repay the favor from before.” Her voice dips, husky and low.

“You tempt a man with such ease.”

“Quite the opposite, actually. This isn’t usual play for me, but you have to understand how long it’s been.”

I don’t misunderstand. Not in the slightest. “Tell me,” I demand. Images of her naked and splayed with red hair spread

like a halo assault my mind. “I want to know exactly how long it’s been since a man made you come.”

“About two weeks, give or take a day.” Her sass sends blood rushing to my cock. If I wasn’t hard before, the ease of her discussing how I made her come on my hand turns me to fucking stone.

“Before that.”

Her breathing increases into brief pants over the line, and I’m grateful I closed my office door earlier.

“A long time.”

“Spell it out for me, Rosie,” I switch to using the name I can’t help but utter when she turns me the fuck on.

“A year,” she gasps.

The buckle to my belt clinks as I flick the stem through the hole and peel it away, wishing it were her hands preparing to reach into my slacks.

“Are you touching yourself?” I rasp and wait on the precipice for her response.

“I’ve had this thought of, um, reciprocating what you did to me in your car. And I want to thank you now with my mouth.”

Fuck. I finally drive my hand beneath my boxer briefs and grip my dick.

“Do you know how many times I’ve pictured your puffy lips wrapped around me?” I stroke slow, keeping the motion steady but not racing to the finish. I want to drag this out as long as possible.

She gasps a sound that sizzles straight to my dick. “Probably not as much as I’ve imagined doing it.”

“Show me,” I growl and pull the phone away from my ear to connect us to video.

“Rhett!” Her breath hitches on my name. I assume she sees my abrupt change of course. Not a second later does the screen change from black to blurry.

I hold my phone angled above me. Keeping the screen visible to me and giving her the perfect shot down my body to the steady pace I stroke myself.

“Hurry up, Rosie. I’m feeling rather impatient to see what you’re doing.”

The image clears of wild movement and comes into focus. She’s propped or holding the phone to aim straight between those beautiful thighs. One knee is cocked, and her foot rests on the seat. The other falls open as wide as it can go in the confines of her front seat. Fabric of yet another skirt drapes across the tops of her knees, and her dainty hand runs slowly along her slit.

“Fucking beautiful,” I groan and stroke myself faster. The lips of her pussy are dusky red and glistening. Her fingers trail from circling her clit to plunging two inside her tight walls.

“Are you away from people?”

“I’m in our usual spot,” she replies breathily, a little muffled due to the distance from the speaker.

My chair squeaks as I sink deeper. “I need to hear you. Don’t be shy.”

“I wish you were touching me. I’m imagining your fingers are inside me again.”

“Put another in for me, Rosie. Stretch yourself with three. Prepare to take my cock.”

She releases an erotic moan as she does as directed. “It’s tight,” she gasps. Her increasing pants tell me she’s close.

“You can take me,” I instruct. “Push them deeper. Fuck yourself faster. I need you to come for me.”

“Oh, Rhett,” she cries my name on a gulp of air as she does as I ask.

“I can hear how wet you are.” I jerk myself faster. The sounds of her sodden cunt drive me toward the brink. “I need to be there so I can drink every drop.”

“I need your mouth.”



Fuck, I'm so close. "I need your mouth too, Rosie. Those pink lips stretched wide over my cock as I fuck the back of your throat."

She whimpers.

"Say my name, Rosie."

She pumps her fingers faster, harder as a keening cry starts.

"Say my fucking name when you come."

"Please, baby."

"Say it!"

"Rhett!" she cries. Her fingers plunge deep as her hips twitch and gyrate. At the sound of my name falling from her sweet lips, the first rope of come shoots from my dick and coats the top of my fist. I keep my eyes glued to the screen and her glistening fingers shoved deep as several throbs jet more from me.

"Show me yours," I demand to see my prize. What she did to herself with thoughts of me in her mind.

She pulls her fingers out with a hitched sigh and presents them to the screen. The digits nearly shimmer with the evidence of her arousal.

"Your turn," she murmurs.

I hold out my messy fist covered in the erotic evidence of my orgasm.

"Next time is down your throat followed immediately by filling your cunt."

A shuffling jerks the camera screen from her side. I use the distraction to snag a few tissues from the box on my desk. I'll never be able to blow my nose again at work without remembering this experience.

Her gorgeous face fills the view. She bites her lip. "Is that a promise?"

I gaze down at her, hoping she doesn't miss the dark assurance. "Tonight."

"As much as I want this to happen, which is a hell of a lot if you can't tell, I think I deserve more than a quickie in the back of your Jeep for the first time." She looks away and bites the inside of her cheek as if suddenly embarrassed. She has fuck-all to be embarrassed about after that fucking sexy display of confidence and trust.

"Give me your attention, Rosie."

I wait until she returns her eyes to the screen. She still appears uncomfortable as if she divulged too much, and dammit, I want to wipe that look off her face.

"First off, I absolutely intend to fuck you in the back of my Jeep someday. Second, I agree that the first time I sink inside you won't be in the back seat or at a fucking truck stop. Tonight, we're getting a room at the Arrow's Inn Hotel, and I'm taking you properly in a bed."

"I can't afford a hotel room yet."

I know how much she hates handouts, so I gentle my voice. "I can afford an extra night. I have my son this weekend so I'll book tonight, and you can leave before his mom drops him off tomorrow."

"What about Ghost?"

"Bring her. I've seen signs that the hotel is dog-friendly. She can have the extra bed since we won't be using it."

Her brows remain fixed in thought.

"If you want this, say yes," I damn near beg. "There aren't any strings attached."

"Okay."

"Good girl." I trap my lower lip between my teeth before releasing it and giving her a smirk. "Now I have to go if I want to get these reports finished. I'll text you when I'm close to the hotel."

She nods. "Should I bring anything?"

“Just you.”

“I meant dinner or drinks.” An eye roll accompanies her words.

I swipe a hand across my mouth to hide another grin. “I know. If we need food, I can order in. Though I don’t expect a lot of time for eating unless it comes served between your legs.”

She squeals. “I’m letting you go, you dirty man.”

“See you in a few hours.”

Evie gives a little wave and ends the video call.

I toss my phone onto my desk and recline in my chair. My hands lace over my lower stomach, reminding me my pants are still spread wide open. I stare at the ceiling, contemplating the last thirty minutes with a light feeling in my chest. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt this carefree in the company of a woman.

Most of my one-night stands existed under the cloak of booze and darkness, yet something’s inherently sexier about being with a woman while stone-cold sober. Not to mention the secrets we’ve both shared add a layer of trust beyond our primal desire.

I don’t have the first clue where this is going, but I’ll take fun and light any day. I’m not disillusioned about Evie’s predicament. She could up and leave me at any moment without saying goodbye. I’m starting to anticipate how badly it would suck if she ghosts me, but I also understand. We’ve both stated our intentions practically from day one.

That doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy every damn second of her company and crave more by the day.

It’s with that thought I retrieve my cell and call the hotel to extend my standing reservation an extra night.

Evie

A TRUCK STOP bathroom is no place to get ready for a sexy night with a new man, but my options are severely limited. Such is the life of living out of my car. I did my best to run a quick razor over my legs and armpits, but this is the twenty-first century after all. A little body hair isn't going to send him running, and if it does, fuck him. He's already seen my vagina with a little hair since I haven't been able to shave her properly in two weeks now. If the man had an issue, he wouldn't have set us up for round two.

Technically three if we're counting the time he had his hand beneath my skirt, but who's keeping track?

I'm washed, dried, and dressed in a long white skirt paired with a black bodysuit that clings to my figure and accentuates my hips. Once Rhett's text gives me the okay to drive to the hotel, I make a quick stop at Cami's to pick up Ghost. I don't feel comfortable leaving her unattended in my car for more than a quick run into the gas station if I don't have to, and Cami was more than willing to take her for an hour.

I'm slightly breathless as I climb from my car and up the stairs to her front door. The anticipation for later fires nerves normally kept dormant. A swift knock later, and she swings the door wide.

"Damn girl, you look amazing!" She gestures me in, and I step over the threshold in a pair of strappy sandals.

I glance down at my outfit as I follow her into her kitchen, hoping it isn't too much. "Thank you. I was going for casual."

"Casual in a small town is a pair of jeans without rips and a clean top. You look like you're about to walk the catwalk."

Shit. "Is it too much?"

"Oh, no, no, no. Don't you dare. Hype that shit up, girl. You're a bombshell."

A comforting warmth sparks in my gut. "Okay, good. Thanks."

"Sorry we can't keep Ghost longer. You looking that hot, I feel like I should do you a solid and ask Law to reconsider." She gives me a cheeky grin.

I laugh. "It's not necessary. I'm not going anywhere Ghost can't, and you have plans."

Cami leans a hip on the counter. "Where exactly are you going?"

"Um..." I stall. Crap. I didn't adequately prepare a response to this. I know Rhett said his friends don't know about his situation, and I assume that includes visiting his son in a hotel. "You know, I forgot what it's called. Some restaurant with a patio out of town," I fib while hoping such a place exists.

"Rhett's taking you?" She drops a knowing smirk.

"It's just dinner."

"I've heard that before, except it was *it's just a one-night stand* and poof! Now they're married with a baby."

"Is this your story?"

She shakes her head. "Nope. Kiersten." Cami takes a drink from a glass beside her. "Though I also had issues admitting my feelings before Law forced them into the open. I think it's just something women do. Especially us strong ones who are used to being independent."

I feel like she knows more about me than she does. Her assessment isn't wrong, though I'm not looking for a

relationship. I tell her as much, but she just laughs.

“We all say that. Whether it’s because we’re working through past hurts or afraid of getting hurt again, it’s just an excuse. If I could do it all over again, I’d jump right in. Would have saved me from more heartache in the long run. Every love hurts a little bit. That’s how we grow.” Her expression turns nostalgic.

“Whoa, pump the brakes. Who said anything about love?”

She straightens. “You’re right. I got away from myself. You probably want to get going so you can have dinner. Let me grab Ghost from Evelyn’s room.”

I try not to think about what Cami said as she retrieves my dog. Love? Ha! No thank you.

She comes back moments later with the bag I use for her toys and my pup.

“Where is it you guys are going tonight?” I ask, remembering she has plans with her family.

“Our new house is just about finished. Law’s taking us for a walk-through. I haven’t seen it since it was only the bones.”

I take the leash from her. “Is it a new build?”

“Mm-hmm. Law’s a contractor. I’m sure you’ve seen his work. He built Rhett’s house.”

My cheeks redden but not for the reason she’d assume. “Oh, um, I haven’t seen it yet, actually. We’re just friends.”

She laughs. “Typical guy. He probably spends his time at your place because his is most likely a pigsty.”

I join her laughter. “That’s probably it. Well, I should head out. Thanks again. Are you still open for next week?” I have two clients scheduled, and Cami and Evelyn have been wonderful dog sitters.

“Of course.” She walks us to the door and holds it open. “With summer just around the corner, Evelyn will be happy to take her most days.”

“You’ve been a real lifesaver.”

Cami smiles softly. “Don’t worry, I already know how you can pay me back. I’m going to need help with a move-out clean in the near future.”

I wave my hand between us. “Psh. I already planned on it. *Without payment* this time. Let me catch up so we’re even.”

“Deal. I’ll bring Kiersten and the drinks. She can bring her inappropriate humor and the baby.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I lead Ghost down the stairs.

“Enjoy your dinner,” she calls as I walk away. I flick my wrist over my shoulder and wave.

Guilt sours my gut as I settle us in the car and back out of Cami’s driveway. I’m barely starting to make friends outside of Rhett, and beginning friendships with lies doesn’t feel right. I’m not usually a dishonest person. Ever since things ended with Tate, it feels like I struggle to tell the truth.

I need to figure out what it is I’m doing. If I’m staying, the best course is to come clean to the people I want to stick around.

My phone rings through my dash. I stab the button on my steering wheel when I see Caiti’s name on the screen.

“Hey, love,” I answer as I check traffic and pull out onto Main Street.

“What are you up to this evening?”

“If you must know, I’m on my way to dinner and drinks with a friend. We booked a hotel room for the night.” I can’t wait for the day when I can just tell people the truth. But I know my brother wouldn’t let me hear the end of it if he knew what I was really up to. Also, who shares their sexual activity with their brother and sister-in-law? This boundary is a necessary one.

“A hotel room, huh? Sounds extravagant for an evening of drinks.”

I sigh. “I haven’t let loose in a while, and there are surprisingly few rideshares here. I don’t even know if there’s a taxi service.”

She laughs. “Arrow Creek sounds like a true small town.”

My heart leaps into my throat as I suddenly remember I let the name slip to my brother. “Is there a reason you called? I’m almost there.” I twist my fingers tight around the steering wheel.

“I just thought it was my turn to call and bug you about a visit.”

“Caiti—”

She cuts me off. “But since I know what you’re going to say, what I really wanted to ask is if you can make time to come here. Your brother just got a promotion, and it would be quite the gift if I could fly you out for a week to surprise him.”

“I don’t know...” I trail off as the logistics swirl like a windstorm in my mind.

Time off with a brand-new business.

Someone to watch Ghost for an extended period.

Airfare and missed wages.

And a quiet little voice teases how I might miss Rhett.

“Eric misses you.” Her guilt-inducing words steal my breath. God, I miss him too. “He worries that you’re out there alone dealing with who knows what because you refuse to share. You don’t have to pay for anything or worry about paying me back.”

“You know how hard that is for me to do.”

“Tell yourself his promotion is paying for it.” Caiti laughs.

I click my blinker to turn into the hotel parking lot. “When are you thinking?”

“A month from now. I want to give you time to make arrangements and also enough time to pass that he won’t guess the surprise.”

“Since you’re so persistent, let me see what I can do with my schedule, and I’ll text you.” I inject my tone with teasing and sass when, in reality, I feel a weight being lifted.



“Yay!” she squeals. “Okay, well I’ll let you go. I have a busy evening planned, and Eric should be back any minute. I don’t want him to overhear the surprise.”

I shift the car into park. “Good timing. I just pulled into the hotel.”

“Love you. Let’s video chat soon, okay?”

I’m grateful we aren’t on video now as blush stains my cheeks. Video calls will never be the same again after this afternoon. “Um, of course. Love you too.”

She hangs up.

I shoot Rhett a text letting him know I arrived and gather our things. I didn’t even pack a change of clothes since my car is a traveling suitcase. All I need are Ghost’s items, and we’re all set for the night.

For a small-town hotel, the lobby is vast and clean. Cool air-conditioning welcomes me through the revolving door. Glinting chandeliers hang in the entry, and a fountain occupies the space decorated in white and chrome. Across from registration is an elevator bank, and to the far left, I can see an open lounge with a bar. Maybe Rhett would like to grab a cocktail to warm up for our evening activities.

The elevators to my left open to reveal the man who’s captured my attention these last two weeks. He doesn’t even bother to disembark. Rather, he stares with a heated gaze that conveys without words that I better get my ass over there before the doors shut again.

I don’t break eye contact as I tap Ghost and lead us across the space. Sliding in beside him sends my temperature skyrocketing. I’m tempted to step back into the lobby for a blast of the cold air. Everything else disperses when he turns to me. The doors closing encase us in our own private box.

He scans my face before locking on my lips. “I wasn’t sure if you’d bail at the last minute.”

“You’ve mistaken my personality if you think that I wouldn’t show.”

His large palm settles in the curve of my waist, hot and authoritative.

“I need to know you want this. When we get to that room, I’m dying to show you what I’ve been thinking about doing to you.” Rhett lowers his mouth to my neck, pressing an open-mouthed kiss there. My skin sizzles at the contact. “All. Day. Long.”

The next press of lips includes a scrape of his teeth along my shoulder. I fist the nearest thing to steady myself, which happens to be the side of his navy button-down shirt.

“I’m all yours for the night.” I speak the truth. I can’t promise much beyond tomorrow morning, but for tonight, he can have whatever he wants. I tilt my head back as he peppers his lips along the column of my throat. “I want you to show me.”

He ensnares my hair in his fist, effectively holding me still. “We haven’t even started, and you’ve already made me a very happy man.” He presses deeper into me, proving his point with a rock-hard erection.

“Rhett,” I gasp.

The doors slide open. He instantly releases me to tug me out of the elevator. A salacious grin settles on his face when he glances back. “I’m counting the number of times I can make you moan my name.”

I don’t even bother glancing around the hallway. I don’t give a fuck if we’re alone or not. Let the world hear the filthy things he wants to do with me. All I can think about is the next ten seconds and getting ourselves behind a locked door for the rest of the night.

He stops us midway down the hall and swipes a key card. The click resonates somewhere in my lower belly as hormonal hell breaks loose. I’m swarmed from the inside with a fire of desire so intense it’s a wonder I’m not already a pile of ashes at his feet.

I’m barely beyond the threshold when he relieves me of the bag on my shoulder. The leash in my hand vanishes next.

He grasps my hands in both of his and advances until my back hits the wall. Vast chocolate brown eyes fill my vision. His body cages mine.

The next breath catches in my throat as his lips seal over mine. He drops my hands in order to bury one of his in the heavy curls at the nape of my neck. His grip stings only a little as he tilts my head to the left. The kiss deepens while he invades my mouth with his tongue. He tastes of coffee and mint and sin.

The taste of him is dizzying and electrifying all at once. We've kissed before, but nothing as all-consuming as this. Our bodies push and pull against one another in both a race and a slow dance. Hurrying and taking our time all at once. His other hand settles on my hip in a possessive squeeze that soaks my panties.

Rhett can't hide the fact he's out of breath as he yanks his mouth away from mine. Broad shoulders beneath my hands heave in time to heavy pants. His reddish lips glisten in the dim hotel room lights. I gaze up at him openly and compliant, waiting for what he has planned.

He reaches out and swipes his thumb along my lower lip, drying the evidence of our kiss with one sinful touch. I expect him to pull away, but he does the opposite. Rhett pushes the flat of his thumb into my mouth and against my tongue.

“Get on your fucking knees for me, baby girl. I haven't been able to stop thinking of this mouth.”

Rhett

THE SIGHT of Evie lowering herself to the ground before me sends a spike of pleasure to my cock. If I thought I was hard before, it's nothing compared to the steely erection I have now. Other than my first time, I can't remember being more ready to fuck than I am at this moment. I'm about ready to join her on my knees and thank the fucking Lord that I have more patience and willpower than I did as a teen. As much as I want to sink myself deep inside and not come up until she's screaming my name, I'm going to make this last long into the night. For all I know, this might be the only one we spend together.

I plant my palm on the wall above her head as the other works open my button and fly. Her gaze hot on mine is a mixture of desire and anticipation.

“So pretty and patient,” I croon.

She licks her lips. “Hurry, Rhett,” she rasps. I release the wall to caress her chin just as I get my pants open. She follows my hand with her cheek when I pull back to shove the garments down my thighs. I spring free, hard and ready, in front of her waiting mouth.

“Show me what you can do,” I taunt in a playful tone. She flips the script by taking me into her hand and sucking me into her hot, wet mouth.

“Fuck...”

My face tips to the ceiling as my eyes slam shut. She expertly uses her tongue around the tip. I fist her hair in a tight grip and encourage her to bob faster.

“Take me deeper, Rosie,” I grunt. As she complies, I bring my gaze back to her to find her staring up at me. Her big eyes are sultry and hooded. A different man would snap a picture, but I’m pretty sure the image of my cock tucked between her perfect lips will live rent-free in my head for the rest of my life.

“You’re such a good girl. You’ve been waiting for a taste of my cock, haven’t you, beautiful?”

Her responsive hum sends a hot spike of pleasure through my gut. I wouldn’t have thought it possible, but I harden more in her expert mouth.

“Are you going to make me come?” I groan and tighten my fist in her hair.

She closes her eyes and swirls her tongue around the head before pulling me deeper into her throat.

I yank her head back until her mouth releases me. “Answer me,” I grit through a clenched jaw.

A string of spit clings from her lip to my tip.

“Yes,” she gasps.

Fuck. This woman. Forget what I wanted earlier. I want her to make me come, but I’ll be damned if the first time is in her hot little mouth. I feel like a man possessed. One touch from her is near enough to send me over the edge. I’m equally enraged and excited by the prospects of tonight.

I want to use her up at the same time she uses me.

My grip directs her to rise from her knees. “Not in your mouth,” I grunt as I press her into the wall at her back. I take her lips in a deep, lingering kiss, not giving that first fuck that she just had it stuffed with my cock. My free hand reaches between us and gathers her skirt in a fist.

“Take your panties off,” I order between sweeping my tongue in her mouth and nibbling on her juicy bottom lip.

Her neck arches back. I use the movement to layer my lips across her exposed throat. Evie’s flurried movements dash beneath the flowy fabric to yank off her underwear. The sassy minx stuffs her drawers in the pocket of my sagging jeans, reminiscent of the day we met when she shoved something else into my pocket.

I grin against her throat. “I hope you know I’m keeping those.”

“You can start a collection,” she smarts back.

“I’m going to fuck the attitude out of you. Lift your leg, Rosie.”

She does as I demand and wraps her thigh around my hip. The material of her skirt stays high on her leg, keeping her exposed. I deftly slide on a rubber and grip a handful of thigh when I’m finished. My fingers of the other hand encircle her soft throat. Her breath hitches with the pressure while her eyes seek mine in the dim room.

“I’m going to wait just like this until you guide me in you.” My thumb brushes over her thundering pulse point. I swear I can detect an uptick in heartbeats. I shuffle a few inches closer until I’m wedged between her thighs, and my dick brushes her wetness. The touch of her delicate fingers startles me into sucking in a sharp breath.

Her eyes, hooded and daring, don’t leave mine as she notches the head of my dick at her opening.

“Hang on to my shoulders.”

Just as the warmth of her palms land on me, I bury myself in her with one swift thrust. She cries out and throws her head back against the wall.

“Goddamn, you feel good,” I grunt, pulling back and sinking deep again. “Give me your eyes, Rosie.” The hand I have on her thigh slides back to grip her ass. I hope my fingers imprint tiny bruises that shock her when she discovers them a

few days from now. I want to give her pieces to remember me by. To leave my mark on her.

Her head rocks forward, giving me what I need to read her. Her mouth drops open on a pant as I bend my knees and drive deep into her enveloping heat. She claws at my back, pulling the cotton fabric for leverage I don't want to surrender. I want to keep her like this, off balance and nearing the edge, until I'm ready to send her over.

Without asking, she yanks my shirt up and over my head.

"Show me your tits," I growl.

One at a time, she pulls them out of the top of her shirt, and I can't help but groan at the sight.

"That's so fucking sexy. They're pushed up like a corset. God, you're beautiful," I praise, keeping a steady pace.

Her bare skin feels fucking fantastic on mine. I lean in, grip flexing on her throat, and smash her tits to my chest. Her nipples press into me, making me wish I had more hands so I could grab them while I hold her throat and keep her leg held high. I want to touch her everywhere.

"I'm close."

"I know, Rosie."

"Are you close?"

"I'm going to explode inside you."

"Please," she begs, her mouth dropping open as a cry tears up her throat.

"My name, Rosie, say it," I grit between clenched teeth, holding back as her walls squeeze the fuck out of my dick.

She gasps, "Rhett." She gives in easily this time, letting my name roll from her luscious lips.

With my grip on her throat, I pin her against the wall, fucking her harder and faster as her orgasm drags out mine.

"That's it, beautiful. Right there," I groan and bury my face into the tender crook of her neck as I come harder than

I've ever come in my entire life. My cock twitches with each jetted seed shot into her warmth. My grip loosens around her throat, and I stroke the softness there. She hangs onto my shoulders that rise and fall with labored breaths as we both float from weightless bliss back to my modern hotel room.

"I have to say... if that's the type of attention you give a girl, I can't blame you for having a harem," she teases, but the mention of other women I've been with ticks me off.

"No," I growl, pressing my body snugly against hers. The mostly naked soft curves mold against me like two halves of the same whole. "You're the only girl to receive that devotion."

Her eyebrows crease adorably over hooded eyes. "I don't understand."

"No one has made me feel the need to possess them like you do." I run my nose from her temple to her chin. "No one," I reiterate, grabbing her throat in a gentle hold.

She gazes deeply into my eyes, her olive-green ones swirling with an inferno of desire. "Then possess me." She cranes her neck to reach my lips, but I hold her pinned by her throat.

"Nuh-uh. I want to show you something."

I brush my thumb over her red, swollen lips and force the soft pillow into her teeth. The flick of her tongue against the digit sends blood rushing to a certain appendage. Bells for round two ding in my head as I spin her to the opposite wall in front of the floor-length mirror.

"Hands up," I order.

She flattens both palms against the mirror at shoulder height. I nudge her thighs apart until she's spread before me like she's about to get frisked. With an easy shove, her flowy skirt pools at her feet. I don't even need to urge her to step out before she's hastily kicking it aside.

"Eager, baby?"



She traps her lower lip between her teeth and nods. I ease behind her, my dick nestled between the cheeks of her ass, and I reach around her torso to take a mound of heavy tit in my hand.

“Look how gorgeous you are. A fucking queen.”

Her bodysuit sits bunched around her waist, the only garment remaining. Her head lolls back on my shoulder as I pinch her dusky nipple into a tight peak.

“You’re going to watch me worship you.” We lock eyes in the mirror. The flush on her alabaster cheeks disguises the freckles there.

With a final pluck to her sensitive tip, I lower myself to my knees, kissing my way down her naked back. My teeth graze the skin of her ass. A swipe of tongue greets the curve between the swell of her ass and thigh. I crawl between her spread legs, giving myself an unrestricted view of her pussy, spread open and waiting for me. The lips are red and glistening.

The image reflected before Evie is hopefully an erotic one. From the front, she has her hands placed on the mirror, tits exposed, and all she can see is the back of my dark head. But if she looks down, she can meet my heated stare while I feast.

The scent of her arousal beckons me forward. The first swipe of my tongue sends a shudder through her so powerful, she nearly buckles. I wedge a shoulder beneath her thigh to help support her trembling legs as I dive back in. The flick of my tongue against her clit brings a chorus of breathy moans and swirling hips as she summons me deeper.

One glance upward reveals her attention locked on the mirror, watching our display intently. Her face contorts as I drive two fingers inside her, curling them deep and rubbing her walls. I add my teeth to her sensitive nub before massaging the sides with my tongue.

“Oh, oh, oh!” she gasps. Her calves flex, and she presses up on her tiptoes.

Without stopping, I toss one thigh over my shoulder, spreading her even wider as I drag my tongue along her slit to

join my fingers. Her taste is intoxicating, and the warmth sends blood rushing to my cock. While I work her with one hand, the other drops to stroke my dick in the most erotic display of my life.

She's seconds away from coming if the increased cries and dripping arousal are any indication.

"Don't forget my name, Rosie." The throaty demand provokes a tremble from her.

"Rhett!" she screams on a long wail as her pussy pulses around my fingers. I keep the digits driving into her, slowing the pace as the aftershocks spark, and remove my mouth.

My head thuds against the mirror at my back.

"You are incredible."

Her tits tremble with her heaving breaths. She lowers herself to straddle my lap and glides her palms over my chest. "We aren't finished yet."

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HOURS LATER, losing count somewhere after orgasm eight for her, we lie tangled in the sheets of a messy hotel bed. Her chaotic curls drape over my naked chest, and I rub a twisted strand between my fingers.

"Hey, Rosie?"

"Yeah?" Her voice is hoarse and thick with sleep.

"Are we more than friends yet?"

She rolls her forehead to the center of my chest, taking the silky strand of hair with her. She stops in the middle of my torso as if she doesn't have the strength to go any farther.

"Mm. Yeah. I think a night of marathon sex makes us more than just friends."

The words settle somewhere deep in my chest for safekeeping.

Rhett

THE LIGHT from the open window leaks through my eyelids and pulls me from a pleasant sleep. We forgot to close the shades last night. Without opening my eyes, I feel around the bed for the warm body that should be nearby. My fingers collide with wild curls before I find the rest of her not more than an arm's length away.

I roll into her soft, smooth body and wrap my arms around her tight. I relish the way she fits like a puzzle piece against the length of my body. All her curves and angles were made exactly for mine.

Fuck, what am I thinking? If I were smart, I'd move us on from this incredible night. I'd kiss her, fuck her again, and send her on her way. Back to the convenience store and nights spent in our cars. We enjoyed one another, just like we joked we would. Scratching an itch, right? Then why does it feel like my entire body is covered in hives?

I don't think once is enough for relief.

With a sigh, I shut down the thoughts and press a kiss to the smooth skin of her shoulder. She mumbles incoherently, bringing a smile to my face. I layer another in the same spot, then move a little higher to the curve of her neck. Even half-asleep, she presents the column of her throat and tilts her chin, wordlessly asking me to continue.

I oblige, turning her onto her back so I can reach the bottom of her chin before I roll fully on top of her to take her lips. We're both still completely nude. The warmth of her body seeps into mine. She opens her knees, allowing me to situate my hips between her spread thighs.

This kiss is the opposite of the one from when we first arrived. Unhurried and slow, I coax her to open and brush my tongue gently against hers. The fact she isn't pushing me off because it's morning turns me on even more. Fuck a little morning breath. If I want to kiss her, that's what I'm going to do.

I reach blindly to the remaining roll of condoms on the nightstand and manage to tear one off. Putting it on with one hand is more difficult, and she reaches between us to take over. I plant my elbows into the bed at our side and take her gorgeous face in both of my hands.

"Are you sore this morning?" I suck in a sudden breath as she rolls the condom down my length and gives me a smooth stroke. The jolt of pleasure wakes me better than any morning cup of coffee.

"A little." Without waiting for my direction, she guides me to her opening and notches just the tip.

I place a chaste kiss on the tip of her nose. "A gentle fuck it is then." I piston my hips inch by inch, letting her take me slow. I dip my three middle fingers into my mouth to wet them and reach between our bodies to circle her clit. She gasps, then moans my name as her pussy instantly floods around my dick.

"Good girl," I groan. "There's another to add to my list."

"Oh, you... you..." She fails to complete her thought as her words cut off on a needy whine.

With one more thrust, I seat myself fully inside. I pause to enjoy the sensation of her slick walls squeezing me. She's very responsive. Judging by her bucking hips and quiet whimpering, I can tell that she's working herself up with my motionless pace.

“Rhett, please move,” she cries and digs her fingers into my back.

“Shh.” I silence her by stealing her lips. My tongue plunges back into her mouth, mimicking the rhythm as I start to move at a steady pace.

Evie grips and claws at my back in an attempt to make me move faster, but I know she’s sore from last night. She might not care, but I do. More than I’ll probably admit to her face. Knowing she’s walking with a slight limp speaks to the caveman inside me, but the side that wants to keep her safe takes it nice and easy.

So I remain steady as I fuck her. My mouth keeps hers busy as my fingers thrum her clit. I circle one direction, then the other. I spread my fingers and rub up and down the sides. All the while, I can feel her orgasm building in the tension of her legs and the sounds of her cunt.

She pulls away from my mouth, disengaging us as her head slams back and arches on the pillow. “Rhett!”

“That’s it, Rosie. Come on my cock, honey.”

She squeezes around my dick, and I drop my head to her flushed chest to suck a hard nipple into my mouth. Her hands fly to the back of my head, holding me there as she screams. “Oh, oh, oh, please don’t stop!”

My balls tighten and draw up. Sweat mists my hairline. I may not be working at a punishing pace, but our fucking is still hot and sweaty. I hold off as long as I can while I keep pushing myself into her. She finally lets go in a long, continuous pulsing wave that milks my orgasm out of me.

“Fuck!” I release her nipple to shout and drop my forehead to the center of her chest. She clings to the back of my head, trapping me against her breasts. If I died right this second, it’d be a damn good way to go.

After a few moments of rest, I plant a few kisses across her bare skin. She giggles and finally releases my head. With a dramatic sigh, she flaps her arms back across the bed.

“That... That was...”

“Amazing. Incredible. God-like?” I tease and smile up at her. She musters the energy to look down at me with a scowl.

“It’s not sexy to hear you sing your own praises.” Evie bites her lip.

I wipe my grin off on her chest. “I was singing yours, Rosie. I don’t think I’ve come that hard or that many times in twenty-four hours in my entire life.”

She giggles and pushes my forehead so my head turns to the side. “Shut up. What time is it anyway?”

Her question prompts us both to check the clock. We both look back at each other with shock.

*11:43*

“Fuck.”

That was me. Her own stream of curses follows shortly after.

“I have to get out of here before your ex arrives with your son.”

I pop off the end of the bed, and she rolls to the side and off. “Hey, let’s calm down. We have time.”

Evie glances around the sex-destroyed room with a grimace. “Really?”

I follow her gaze to the overturned lamp. The set of handprints on the mirror that any sexually informed adult would know what they mean. Beyond the strewn clothing that will get picked up as we dress, there’s also the messed-up beds.

“I pick him up in the lobby so my ex won’t even see the room. Besides, the little guy is two. He’ll be none the wiser.”

Evie already has her bra on and drags her shirt over her head when I glance at her. She steps into her ruffled white skirt as she responds. “I guess you’re right. I should still get out before you need to get to the lobby in...thirteen minutes.”

I follow suit and start layering on clothes, ignoring the pang that our time together is over. Back to separate cars and

sleeping beneath the stars.

“We’ll send you down first. Hey...” I snag her wrist as she starts shoving Ghost’s items away in a tizzy. “It’ll be okay.”

She shakes her head and drops her gaze to where my fingers encircle her. After a moment, she shakes it off to resume her hasty packing. “Yeah, you’re right. I’m just hungry, and Ghost could use a potty break.”

I eye her skeptically. Something else is going on. Emotions are high after spending the night together. I know for a fact mine are, and I’ll need time to sort that shit. Now probably isn’t the right time.

She slings the bag over her shoulder and takes her dog’s leash. “I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

Another weekend sleeping in a hotel while she’s in her car still doesn’t sit right with me.

“Why don’t you drive back this evening to sleep? Nobody will know besides you and me.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t. This is your time with your son. Even if he isn’t old enough to know the difference, I am.”

“What about staying at Cami’s this weekend?”

“Rhett, you have eight minutes. I have to go. I’ll be fine. I’m always fine.” Her smile seems to fall short of her eyes.

I want to go to her and shake her. I want to command her to stay as easily as I ordered her onto her knees last night. But I know I can’t. I don’t control her, and her points are more valid than mine. A few weeks of friendship and a night together doesn’t give me a say in what she does.

Instead of all the possible propositions and wants, I jerk my chin up. “Go on. I’ll text you later to check in.”

“Okay.” She stops with her hand on the doorknob. “And thank you. I had a really great night with you.” This time, the smile stretching her swollen lips is full and genuine.

“Me too.”

The click of the door behind her is deafening. I walk to the bed and shake the comforters back into place as best as I can. It's not like Tommy is going to care or know the difference. As I round the second bed, I trip on something. Peeking out from beneath the platform is a red, plush dog toy. If I hurry, I can get it to her before she drives away.

The elevator ride wastes another two minutes of my time before Nora's arrival. As soon as the doors open, I sprint across the empty lobby and through the revolving door. I'm brought up short by the scene in front of me. Evie loads Ghost into the passenger seat of her car and shuts the door just as a tall, blond male blocks her from walking back around the front.

I see fucking red. The damn toy in my hand squeaks because I clench it so hard. Before I can think through any consequences, I'm striding across the lot on a direct trajectory to this motherfucker.

They don't see me before I reach them. I don't stop moving. Just grab him by the shoulder and send him flying in the opposite direction.

"Who the fuck are you?" I snarl. I slap the toy into Evie's stunned hands as I pass by and stalk the guy straightening from a crouch. He caught himself before hitting the ground, but next time, he won't be so lucky.

The guy stands to his full height with a weirdly protective smirk. "I should be asking you that."

"Wrong." I plant myself between Evie and this douche and cross my arms over my chest.

"Look, I don't know who you think you are, but you aren't part of this conversation."

"Guys, stop!" Evie shouts and moves closer, but I throw out an arm to hold her back.

"If it involves her, I'm not going anywhere."

"I don't know who you are, but you need to back the fuck away from my sister." He sheds the amused attitude and



switches to a protective one. My possessiveness cools as his words register.

“This is your brother?” I ask Evie as she moves cautiously between us.

The horrified expression on her face has me wanting to wrap her in my arms and whisk her back inside the safety of our room.

“Yep. This is Eric. Eric, this is my *friend* Rhett.”

I don’t miss the emphasis.

Evie gives me big eyes. “Don’t you have to go?”

Shit. I do. A quick scan around the parking lot doesn’t reveal Nora’s Mercedes, but she should be here any minute.

“Call me later.” I squeeze Evie’s shoulder and jog back across the lot, leaving the siblings to face off.

I don’t bother returning to my room. Nora should be here any minute. Though I use the time waiting to order a soda from the bar across the lobby. My mouth remains dry from last night’s activities. The sip of Coke washes away the parched feeling in my throat. After chugging half the can, I survey the lobby.

Nora stands near the fountain with a critical look on her face. I want to deliver false apologies for keeping her waiting, but I swallow them as easily as I drank my Coke. As I cross the room, I check the revolving door for signs of Evie. My distraction doesn’t go unnoticed.

“Are you looking for somebody?”

“Nope, just checking the weather,” I lie.

Evie

I GUESS I don't have to wonder about whether or not my brother knows about my sexual activity. After that little caveman display, he's well up to speed on who exactly Rhett is to me. Shame pinkens my cheeks during our walk together back into the hotel after arguing in the parking lot. More secrets than I wanted to disclose were exposed in broad daylight.

When we step into the lobby, I'm thankful that Rhett, his ex, and his son are nowhere to be found. Running into the trio would be the absolute icing on this shit-tastic cake.

"I still can't believe you're here," I mutter as we ride the elevator up to the twelfth floor. I should be grateful we're nowhere near the room I shared last night, but knowing Rhett is somewhere in this hotel makes me want to take him up on his offer to stay another night.

"Accident or not, I finally got the name of the town you were in. Of course I'd take the first flight across the ocean to check on you. Caiti stayed up all night searching every social media platform for Arrow Creek community groups. She finally stumbled on a post you made for your business and found the correct state. She could probably work for the FBI with her sleuthing skills."

"You could have just taken my word for it." The elevator dings. I step off but wait for Eric to lead the way.

He bumps my shoulder as he passes. “It’s been months. First knowing you were still living with Tate but separated, and then you went on the run.”

“I wasn’t *on the run*,” I fire back. “Can’t a girl have some privacy after a major breakup?”

“Not when I’m the only family you have. Buy a new car. Drastically change your hair. Do anything except hide from me. Not cool, Evie.”

The key card opens the door, and he steps back for me to enter. The squeals that reach my ears nearly knock me back into the hall.

“You already found her! I thought we were going to be searching for hours!” Caiti launches herself into my arms. I’m assaulted by shiny black hair and the smell of cherry blossoms. I squeeze her back.

Eric shoves the door with more force than necessary. “You won’t believe this shit, Cait.”

“Eric,” I hiss. Here we go again. “Let it go.”

“What shit?” Caiti pushes me back at arm’s length and scans me head to toe. “What’s going on?”

“Do you have anything to drink? Also, I’m ordering room service on your tab since Eric won’t let me leave to get food,” I mutter

“What the hell, Eric?” Caiti immediately jumps to my defense.

“Aren’t you curious why I found her loitering in a hotel parking lot?” His car keys clank on the counter where he tosses them.

Caiti pins me with a quizzical stare.

“Oh, come on. I wasn’t loitering.” I throw my hands up in the air.

Eric pops the top on a beer from his mini-fridge. They sure came prepared. I hold out my hand when Caiti passes one over, ignoring the fact it’s only noon on a Saturday.

“Will someone tell me what the heck is going on?” Caiti twists her own top off but holds her drink as if knowing she’ll need the full amount once she gets her answer.

“She’s living in her fucking car!” Eric’s tight control on his emotions, with all the gentle ribbing, is unleashed in the presence of his sister and his wife. The hurt in his tone bears down on us like a raging flood.

“What?” Caiti asks again and turns to me, beer forgotten.

“Eric, it isn’t like that.” A mark scores across my heart at the pain I’ve caused.

He takes another swig. “Oh, yeah? Tell me what it’s like then. No wonder you didn’t want us to come out sooner. We’d have discovered your little secret when you didn’t have a place for us to stay.”

“What?” Caiti’s question is waterlogged. I snap my gaze from my brother to her face. The shame smacks instantaneous at the tears tracking down her cheeks. Her head cocks to the side, and she wipes a wet cheek on her shoulder. “You’ve been living in your car? All this time?”

Guilt steals the volume to my voice. “It’s only been a few weeks. I didn’t want you to worry.”

A hysterical bubble of laughter breaks free from Caiti and tears my heart in two. “Are you kidding? We’ve worried this entire time. Why else do you think we hopped on the first flight as soon as we knew where you were staying?”

“I didn’t know what else to do.” I cross the room and sit on the bed, noting the similarities to the room I left not that long ago and wishing I could go back.

“You could have told us! We’re your family!” Caiti cries

Eric pulls his wife close to his side in an attempt to comfort her. It stings a little, desperately needing a hug of my own, but all I seem to do is push people away.

“I didn’t want to make Eric pick sides. There are things I’m not ready to share, and after everyone else chose Tate, I couldn’t take the chance that you’d choose him too.”

“I wouldn’t choose anyone over you,” my brother snips, unable to disguise his pain at my admission.

“Can we table this for now? I already said I’d sleep here this weekend. We can discuss it later after I’ve had some food.”

My brother disengages from his wife and takes my dog’s leash. “I’ll take her to the bathroom and find a place to grab us a meal.”

His offer stems less from generosity and more the need to get his feelings under control. I don’t fault him. Rather, I envy his ability to take space. I doubt Eric or Caiti plan to let me out of their sight for the foreseeable future.

“You can go too. Get a glimpse of the town.” I pick at my cuticle.

Caiti plops on the bed beside me and cheers the drink warming in my hand. “Nuh-uh. Already drove through it. You and I are going to catch up.”

Seemingly satisfied with his wife’s declaration to essentially babysit me, Eric takes Ghost and leaves.

“Now that he’s gone, give it to me straight. You sounded so well on the phone. Why did you turn down all our offers to help?”

I stand and take a drink of my beer to stall for time. The condensation dampens my hand. “This is the part I’m not ready to share. You have to trust that I’m doing what I can to take care of it.”

“I don’t know if I’d call living out of your car taking care of it.” She looks out the window and takes a drink of her own.

“Look.” I sigh. I need to give an inch, or they won’t let up. “It’s not as bad as it sounds at first glance. I’m making friends here. Real friends. Not like the kind I had back home who chose Tate over me. And I met someone who spends most nights in the parking lot too, so I’m not alone.”

“Oh, that makes me feel loads better that you found someone else living out of their car to commiserate with. A

match made in heaven.” Her skepticism is blatant.

I want to snarl. “You’re being judgmental.”

“I—” Her face falls. She wipes a strand of hair sticking to her lip. “You’re right. I’m sorry. Where I come from, the types who live out of their cars aren’t exactly who I’d pick for dating material.”

I slam my beer on the dresser. “That’s exactly it. Maybe you need to take a step back and realize sometimes normal people fall into hard situations. Over half the population in this country is one major medical event away from being homeless. *I* fell into a hard situation, and rather than have your judgment, I could use your support.”

“Evie, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know you didn’t. It’s easy to make exceptions for the people we love.” I catch sight of myself in the mirror. Ugh, the bird’s nest that is my hair might explain why they don’t believe I’m faring well. “Do you have a comb? Mine’s in my car.” I catch her eyes through the reflection.

She nods and retrieves it from her carry-on. I get to work picking through the tangled curls.

“And if you’re judging even more, this is sex hair, not homeless hair, thank you very fucking much.”

Caiti looks at her bare feet. “I’ve offended you.”

“Yep.”

“Sex hair?” She rolls her lips between her teeth to stifle a giggle. I let mine free.

“Uh-huh.”

“Judging by the hair, I’d say good sex?”

“Fucking fantastic sex.” I smile.

“Now that’s a look I haven’t seen on your face in a while. You’re happy here?”

I face her before returning to the mirror. “I’m happier than I’ve been in a long while, Cait. It wasn’t all lies.” I lower my

arms to my sides. “I’m starting my business. I’ve made some friends. I really like it here. I can take you and Eric on this beautiful hiking trail after work tomorrow.”

She returns my genuine grin. “I’d like that.”

Once I finish picking through my hair, I set the comb down. I drain the remainder of my beer and point the neck of the empty bottle at her. “You realize you’re on my side now, right? None of this forcing me to go home once Eric returns.”

“Can I at least leave you with some money?”

“No. I don’t want handouts. I’m doing this on my own.”

“What about buying you dinner?”

I pretend to think about it and tap my chin. “Eric can buy me dinner. You can buy me drinks. That’s what we’d do when I’d come visit you guys before.”

“Deal. But only if you invite your sex-friend.”

I pivot on a heel and stare her down. “Oh, no. He and Eric have already met, and it wasn’t very pleasant.”

“Exactly why you need to bring him. If you’re living out of your car in this town while you get on your feet, I need to meet at least one person you’re spending time with to suss them out. See if they really have your back.”

I shrug. “Just remember if dinner goes south, and they end up brawling over cheap cocktails, that’s on you.”

Caiti grins wide, revealing her perfect white teeth. “I always liked a good fight.”

“Great. Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to take a long, hot shower before my brother gets back.”

“Have at it.” She snags the remote from the dresser and flicks on the television. She stretches her slender body out on the queen-sized bed. “I’m going to take a nap. Jet lag.” She yawns.

Leaving her to relax, I lock myself in the bathroom. She’s not the only person who could use a nap. My eyelids feel heavy at the intrusion of silence. After a late-night sex

marathon and the excitement of this morning, I could sleep for a week. Though the thought of a long, relaxing shower does perk me up. I didn't get the chance to enjoy one with Rhett last night. It's not a five-star hotel, but it beats a truck stop shower any day.

Standing naked in the center of the room, I assess the evidence of last night. A reddish mark near my collarbone. Tiny purple bruises from his fingertips dot along my thigh. A bruise on the back of my arm from knocking over the lamp. With a content smile, I snag my cell phone and type out a text to Rhett.

*Me: You're apparently invited to a family dinner. I thought we could meet at Calypso's for food and drinks. Let me know what day you're free, or if I have to make up an excuse why you can't join us.*

I add a wink face to convey that I won't be offended if he doesn't want to get involved.

I'm about to step under the heavenly spray when my phone vibrates with Rhett's reply.

*Rhett: Monday.*

His one-word response sends a slight pang through me. I hope the run-in this morning didn't change his opinion of me. As soon as the thought comes, a follow-up text vibrates the phone in my hand and chases it away.

*Rhett: Still have the taste of you on my tongue. Have a good weekend, Rosie.*



Rhett

I PARALLEL park across the street from Calypso's just before five on Monday night, wanting to kick my own ass for being here. I don't know why I agreed to come. My knowledge of how relationships work is severely limited, judging by the fact I've had exactly one, and it ended in heartbreak. After this weekend, I don't know if Evie and I are supposed to slap a label on ourselves or continue to draw a line at friends with benefits. And this feels strangely like a dinner to meet the parents.

Except her parents are dead, so I get the protective older brother instead.

The side of me that agreed to come is the side that wants to be there for her. That guy who would part with any reasonable dollar amount to help her situation. That guy under the spell of a curvy beauty and fantastic blow jobs and incredible wit. I'd probably walk across a pit of fire to experience more of those things.

The guy who's in his thirties and remembers the last time he let a woman get too close is the one that wants to ditch this charade and keep us strictly friends.

My cell vibrates with a text, distracting me from the clusterfuck of thoughts. Speak of the damn devil in red horns and an expensive dress. Nora's name pops up on the screen. If

she didn't have my son, I'd ignore her shoddy attempts at conversation.

*Nora: Can you meet? I'm ready to agree to your terms.*

Not this shit again. I pocket my phone without responding. She already knows my answer. The pressure is mounting for her because we finally have a date on the judge's calendar. I can't wait for this to end.

The sounds of a busy bar assault my ears the moment the door swings open. I hold it with my back to let a group of stumbling girls giggle their way past. By the leaning into one another and shrill noise, I'd say they're well on their way to a drunken evening even though it's only five o'clock. As I wait to pass, I scan the crowd, easily spotting Evie's gorgeous curls at a table near the back.

A hand clamps on my wrist. "Hey there, handsome."

I don't spare the owner a glance as I pry the fingers from my body. "Don't touch me."

"What a dick." Her scoff reaches my ears.

The group blocking the door clears, and I continue by without offering a response. The current beneath my skin settles into a continuous buzz while my eyes remain glued across the room. I make my way there without a care for the people around me. My trajectory is set. Damn whoever steps in my way.

Her brother sees me first and fixates a scowl on his face. Seeing him without the blinding tint of rage, I notice the similarities between the siblings. Their eyes are the same round shape with thick eyelashes, and they have the same chin. Evie's face is rounder and full, where her brother's is sharp and angular.

Noticing her partner's look, the other woman at the table follows the direction of his gaze to me. Her eyes pop comically wide. I hope that's a sign of approval and not one that she's about to talk Evie into running far away from me.

Evie must finally take notice of the others' expressions because she turns fully in her chair. Our eyes lock across the

crowded room. A shy smile curves her lips. Her tongue makes an appearance by swiping across her lower lip, and now I'm fighting against getting hard. Images of her on her knees with my cock in her mouth suddenly occupy my mind.

I grin back and approach the table, pausing at a respectable distance. "Hey. I hope I'm not late."

"Not at all," Evie answers. "You can sit."

"Do you want me to grab a round first?" I offer the group. Money is still tight, but I can't stifle who I am. Some might say I throw my money around, but I prefer to be generous with the people I care about. Unlike my ex-wife, my spending comes without conditions.

"That'd be awesome," the woman across from Evie responds.

"Hey, I'm Rhett Senova." I step closer and offer my hand.

She shakes my hand. "Caiti Harris. I'm the sister-in-law, but we're as close as real siblings."

"Nice to meet you." I drop her hand and move to the brother. "We haven't met officially. I'm Rhett."

"Eric," he grunts and squeezes my hand briefly. Not in a douche way. I get the impression he's not thrilled to meet me. If we have any hope of getting him off Evie's back, we'll have to change that.

I take everyone's order and return a few minutes later with a tray of drinks. After handing them to their owners, I take the empty chair next to Evie and toss my arm casually over the back. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, but the move feels natural for the situation.

"So what brings you to Arrow Creek?" I ask before I savor that first smooth sip of whiskey after a long day.

"Someone wouldn't tell me where she was staying, so once I got the name, I had to come check out the place," Eric answers. "Glad I did too."

Evie relaxes back and keeps a hand wrapped around her glass. "I'm not a child anymore. You don't need to look after

me.”

“Did she show you around yet?” I trail my gaze through the faces at the table.

“We went on a beautiful hike today,” Caiti answers first. Probably to keep her husband from spouting more sarcastic remarks. “It was incredible. Evie said you brought her there first.”

I look at the woman on my right side and grin. “I did.”

“It was okay,” Eric puts in and slings back his own whiskey.

“Eric,” Caiti hisses followed by his grunt of pain. If she kicked him beneath the table, I like her already.

“It would have been better if he didn’t spend the entire time hounding me about my living arrangements. Still a beautiful day for a hike, nonetheless.” Evie’s response quells the bickering. She reaches discreetly beneath the table and squeezes my thigh.

Not helping the dick situation. I hide a groan by sipping my drink.

“Hey, sorry for the wait. Are you guys wanting to order food tonight?” Dane, the bartender, stops by our table and picks up the discarded drink tray.

“Busy night, huh? Enough for you to come out from behind the bar.” I make small talk with my friend.

He slings his white towel over his shoulder and holds the circular tray in front of his abdomen. “I had one waitress call out, and another’s out on maternity leave. I’m lucky I have two bar trainees tonight, or I’d be swamped.” His gaze scans the table again.

“Sorry to hear that. I think we’re interested in some food and another round.”

Dane pulls out a notepad, and we take turns giving our orders. He leaves with the promise to return shortly with the new drinks.

As soon as he's out of earshot, Eric leans forward. "Sounds like he needs some help. Maybe you should put the cleaning business on hold and come work here. Steady wage and tips."

Ah, fuck. He can't leave well enough alone. Evie straightens from chatting with Caiti.

"This is exactly why I didn't want you to come visit," she snaps.

Eric shoves his finger across the table in her direction. "No, you didn't want me to come visit because you're harboring a bunch of shitty secrets."

"Eric!" Caiti interjects, but the sibling pair ignores her.

"That too! Because I know exactly how you'd react."

"You have one second to get that finger out of her face," I state, deadly calm and serious. The table falls quiet.

"I don't even know who the fuck you are. Don't tell me what to do," Eric barks back, thoroughly drawing the attention of the patrons around us.

"Girls, why don't you take your drinks to the patio for some fresh air," I suggest while looking Eric straight in the eye.

"You don't get to order my wife and my sister around." He tries again to dominate the situation, but he doesn't realize he's falling way short.

I turn my head slightly to catch Evie's eye as she quietly watches the exchange from beside me. "Evie. Outside, yeah?"

A look of contemplation crosses her face for only a second before she nods. "C'mon, Cait." The legs of her chair scrape across the floor.

"Since when do you take orders? You would have put Tate in his place if he told you what to do." Eric keeps at his sister, pushing my irritation to a boiling point. My skin grows uncomfortably tight at the need to do something physical.

Evie flips her hair over her shoulder as she glares at her brother. "I'm taking a well-advised suggestion. Until you can

back off, I don't want to talk to you." She stalks off with Caiti close behind.

Eric's glass clanks against the table. "Say what you need to say." He leans over the dark-stained wood separating us, forearms resting on the edge, and rotates his glass between both hands. He carries the look of a defeated man.

"I get it."

"Get what?" He finally looks me in the eye, man to man.

"The need to protect her." I instantly raise both hands with my palms facing him before he can bite out a retort. "Obviously, she's not my sister. But I can understand, appreciate even, why you'd hop a plane and fly ten hours straight to check out her new place."

"I'm not sure you do."

"I don't have a sister, no, and I haven't lost my parents."

His gaze slides away, and he takes a hefty swallow while I resume.

"You have to understand that she's not alone here. I'm looking out for her."

"I don't mean to be a dick when I say I'm not sure a guy who looks like you is the type I want looking out for my sister."

"And I don't mean to be a dick when I say that it's not up to you to decide what that type of man should look like. You do need to try to get that I don't want anything to hurt her, and that includes me."

He rakes a hand through his hair. "You look like a screw 'em and leave 'em type."

I grunt a humorless laugh. "That's not any of your business, but Evie's a grown woman. She can decide what she wants in her life."

"She looks like a grown woman, sure, but when she hauls ass halfway across the country on a whim and doesn't tell

anyone where she is, that's not the actions of a responsible adult."

"She's shown more maturity in her little finger than you've shown since I met you. I'm not sure you're the expert on adult responsibilities."

He shrugs. "Touché."

"Look." I straighten and pick up my glass. "You don't know me. I get that. I've also spent nearly every day of the past few weeks with Evie, so I'd like to think I'm getting to know her pretty well. I'm sure you know trying to force her to come with you isn't going to bode well for your relationship. She wants to make this work on her own."

Eric studies the room in silence. I hope he's mulling over my words rather than ignoring them.

I push harder.

"The first day Evie got here, she got the attention of a sleazy trucker."

Eric's gaze snaps to mine, and his jaw clenches.

"A few days after that, he cornered her while she went to take a shower. She fended him off with her dog and her knife in an impressive show of strength."

"You telling me this means I'm getting her out of here tonight. I hope you know that."

I shake my head, knowing Evie would never let that happen. What's comical is that he thinks she would.

"What I'm getting around to saying is that I went back when she was at work and roughed him up a little. Let him know what would happen if he crossed paths with her again."

"So you have anger issues."

"No, I have protection issues that your sister seems to bring out in me. I don't know what else I can say to convince you. If she has a problem, I'm going to take care of it."

He drains his glass and pushes it to the center of the table. "What's it to you? Why have you taken this strong liking to

my sister?”

“I don’t have an answer to that. I do know that I’m going to do what I can to help her, but she’s doing a damn good job on her own. Which you’d see, if you’d take your head out of your own ass.”

“I don’t know why you think you can talk to me like that.”

“Because you think you can talk to her like this,” I fire back. My hand on my thigh curls into a fist. Not because I want to deck the guy, which I sort of do. All this talk heightens the tension in my body. I feel like I need to do something, and getting up and pacing isn’t an option right now. “She’s working hard. She doesn’t deserve your constant criticism.”

Dane interrupts with a fresh round. We pause the conversation while he deposits the drinks and whisks away the empties.

“Let’s pretend you’re right, and I put my trust in you.”

“Go on.”

Eric rubs his hand over his chin. “What do I get to do if you fuck with her?”

A chuckle escapes. This guy. Same feisty attitude as Evie, but he’s using it in all the wrong ways. “Tell me”—I rest an elbow on the table—“what you did to her ex when *he* fucked with her, hmm? It’s my understanding that he’s still your best friend.”

“She really told you everything,” he grumbles.

I snag my drink. “I don’t know if it’s everything, but like I said, I’ve spent nearly every day with her. She’s a pretty open book when she has a patient ear to listen.”

“What would you have done?”

“I don’t have a sister, and I probably don’t have the full story. From what I’ve heard, if anyone treated someone I care about like that, they’d be cut off.”

His shoe squeaks against the floor as he shifts uncomfortably. “Does that go for Evie? You’d protect her that



much here?”

“I can’t predict the future. I personally have no intention of hurting her. She’s met some of my friends, and they seem to be forming their own bonds, so I don’t see a problem there. But if anyone else like that fucking trucker crosses her path, you better believe I’ll take care of it.”

“So do you think you’ll accept my apology for being a dick before the girls return?”

I laugh, actually feeling the mirth. “Done. I understand where you’re coming from, but you have to know you won’t get her to do much by bossing her around.”

“Don’t I know it.”

The sounds of chatter and music filter back into awareness, as if someone turned up the volume to the rest of the room, while a silence descends between the two of us.

“One more thing before they come back.”

“Go for it,” I reply easily, not intimidated in the slightest by his big brother act.

“What happens when your situation is over? Evie mentioned that you two met at the truck stop but wouldn’t give the details out of respect for your privacy. I’m not asking for that.” He waves his hand to brush the intrusion aside.

I cut him off. “If you’re asking if I’ll leave her to sleep in her car alone, the answer is I fucking hope not. We both know she doesn’t take orders or handouts easily, but if she isn’t on her feet when I get back on mine, I’m going to do whatever I can to at least get her a safe place to sleep.”

Eric sucks in sharply through his teeth. “Even if that means your bed, am I right?”

I catch his eye over the rim of my glass, raised to take a drink. “I didn’t say that,” I mutter and toss some back.

“I suppose I should be grateful,” he grunts.

“I’ll offer the gamut. Hotel room, spare bedroom, friend’s couch, first month’s rent. You and I both know she’ll only

accept what she feels ready to accept, and there's not a damn thing we can do about it. All that to say, I suggest we drop this conversation now because I don't feel too good discussing this with her brother behind her back. You asked your questions, and you've been given a wide range of answers."

"Thanks. If you don't mind, I'll ask them to come back."

"That's not a bad idea. Food's probably about ready, and I know she's eager to see what you think."

Evie

“FIRST OF ALL, he’s hot as hell, sister,” Caiti says as we relax on the patio. The cool air chases away the heated tension from arguing with my brother. “Secondly, Eric is absolutely going to kill you.”

“I don’t care.” I gaze off into the darkness beyond the parking lot and sip my crisp drink. The bite of vodka perfectly counteracts all the words crammed into my throat. If Eric hasn’t learned to chill before we come back, he’s going to get a damn piece of my mind. “He has no reason to.”

She scoffs. “Tell me with a straight face that you aren’t sleeping with Rhett.”

All I can manage is a quirk of my brow as I return my attention to her. “And that matters why?”

“It only matters that he’s treating you well, and my guess after seeing the two of you together, he is. But Eric isn’t going to like that you’re halfway across the world sharing a bed with a stranger.”

“We aren’t sharing a bed.”

“Excuse me, a back seat.” She leans forward and fires back. “I think it’s sexy and adventurous.” She tosses a curtain of dark hair over her shoulder and gives me big, flirty eyes. I can’t help but giggle for the first time tonight.

I bite my lip. “Sexy is one word for it. Though we’ve only hooked up once, and it was in a hotel room.” I leave out the incident in the front seat of his car. She doesn’t need all the wicked details.

Caiti rubs her two first fingers on her temples and closes her eyes. “I’m getting a message. I see a lot of hot, dirty sex in your near future.”

“Oh, shut up.” I shove one of her arms away with a silly grin.

“Are you kidding me?” She jerks her thumb over her shoulder. “Were you not in there when he was all possessive and commanding? ‘Girls, go outside,’” she mimics a deep voice sounding nothing like Rhett. “I’m positive there’s a wet spot on my panties.”

“You’re married to my brother,” I toss out teasingly. They’ve been in love for so long I know she’s not serious.

“Don’t you worry, I get hot and bothered plenty when he does the possessive thing too.” She delicately sips her cocktail.

“I know you’re like my sister and all, but that’s TMI.”

A shadow crosses over our table, interrupting her response. I know without even looking that Eric stands waiting for my attention. To stall for time, I drain the remainder of my glass.

“Food should be at the table soon if you’re ready to come back inside.” He announces his presence with the soft-spoken invitation.

Caiti and I lock eyes as she stands. Her fingers curl around my brother’s bicep for balance, and she rises on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “I’ll give you two a moment.”

“Thanks, baby,” he murmurs low. It slides beneath the noise of patrons but not too quiet I can’t hear the endearment. My heart clenches happily for the two of them. Their love will last a lifetime.

Maybe someday I’ll find that too.

I rise in preparation. If he doesn’t apologize, I’ll make a quick getaway until he’s ready to stop being an ass.

“Wait.” He steps in my path.

I square my shoulders and raise my chin, but it’s not much help. Eric will always be my big brother—both in size and the fact he’s spent a decade protecting me. I leave the burden to fix this up to him.

“I’m sorry,” he starts immediately, dousing some of my fire. “When I got here and found you at the hotel, it was like all my worst fears were confirmed.”

Like I knew it would, the first cracks form in the concrete wall surrounding me. I hold tight to my silence when, in reality, I’m clinging to my emotions in a double-handed grip.

“You’re *homeless*, Evie.” His voice splinters on the word. “No matter the reasons for it, I can’t begin to tell you what that does to me inside.”

“I’m okay,” I croak. My throat could suddenly use that drink I drained.

“Yeah, you are.” He rubs the back of his head as his face turns deadly serious. He steps closer. “But you have to promise me that as soon as you aren’t, you’ll find someone to lean on. Rhett, for starters, but if that relationship changes, you find someone else, or you come to me. No more keeping secrets.”

“Did you say Rhett first?”

Eric shakes his head, and I can physically feel the mood lighten. “Yeah, yeah. He won me over a little bit.”

“I knew that much when you came out here without a black eye, though I’m glad to hear you confirm it.”

“You also have to promise to tell me if he fucks you over so I can hop on another ten-hour flight to get back here.”

“Deal.” I grin up at him. “Let’s go eat before our food gets cold.”

As I make my way around him, he snags my arm. “One more thing.”

My stomach gives a hearty rumble. I peer up at him with an annoyed glare.

“I’ve missed you. A huge part of that is my fault because when things went down, I chose the wrong person.”

That happy feeling from seconds ago dissipates like a puff of smoke in a breeze. “Eric,” I warn. He knows this isn’t a topic I’m willing to discuss.

He shakes my arm still in his grasp. “I screwed that up.”

“You didn’t choose anything. If you did, you wouldn’t be here.”

“That’s not true. I let Tate say some shitty things about you and some of them I even believed.”

My hackles raise at the same time my stomach bottoms out. “Like what exactly?”

He raises his hands with his palms facing me. “I still don’t know the details of what happened. But when he said you were being dramatic and immature, I believed him. I didn’t want to lose my best friend.”

Knowing all the things Eric doesn’t know, I can’t blame him for his rush to judgment. My brother spent four years of his early adulthood raising me after our parents passed away. I once heard that people will always see others in the form they were easiest to exert control over. I don’t doubt that Eric still sees me as a lost fifteen-year-old girl who was very dramatic at times, regardless of how much time has passed.

“While I can admit now that it hurts he’s still in your life, I can also tell you that as long as you keep him out of mine, it won’t be an issue,” I deliver gently.

Even so, his face falls as if I said the opposite. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“People never do. You’ve apologized. You’ve flown halfway across the world to be here. And you aren’t on some crusade to get us back together, so I can leave it alone and say I forgive you. Even when you’re being a giant ass.”

Eric wraps his arm around my shoulder and nudges me to the side. The message that the conversation is over received. “As if you haven’t been throwing major attitude since I got here.”

“You mean since you ambushed me?”

Walking back into Calypso’s, I’m smacked with the mouthwatering aroma of fried foods and beer. My stomach chooses to release a ferocious rumble.

“If you ever hide from me like that again, I will drag you kicking and screaming to the airport if I have to.”

I roll my eyes and shake my head at the same time, giving his waist a light squeeze. “And you say I’m the dramatic one?”

“I mean it. Not knowing where you are isn’t something I want to do ever again. I thought getting you through high school was rough.”

“Well, you’ll be happy to hear I don’t have any plans to go anywhere in the near future.” I glance around the crowded bar as we make our way to our table. “Something about this town makes me want to stay a while.”

“Or someone,” Eric says, dropping the teasing accusation as we reach our table. I’m grateful to hear the smile in his tone.

That specific someone stands from his seat and gestures to my empty chair. My heart gives a dainty flutter.

“Dane just dropped our plates two minutes ago.”

I’m cocooned by the warmth in his rich, brown eyes. “Perfect timing then.”

Rhett waits for me to sit before resuming his place in his own chair. The sound of sizzling from the hot plate beckons me, and I waste no time digging in to the chicken fajitas I ordered. Before I get that first bite, Rhett flips the hair closest to him over my shoulder and runs his fingers through it down my back. Tingles erupt along the path.

“How long will you two be in town?” Rhett asks, pulling back and retrieving his own fork.

“Only a few days. We flew out so fast that Eric couldn’t secure more time off,” Caiti answers.

“We’ll fly to visit Tate in Colorado on Friday and head back home after the weekend.” Even after their long chat and his apology, Eric can’t seem to disguise the warning in his voice. As if he believes Rhett’s waiting until he leaves to drop some act. I’m both touched and annoyed by how much he cares.

“We should do this again before you go. I’ve been meaning to take Evie to the Tavern on the River. You’re welcome to come.” Rhett delivers his invitation before digging into a pile of fries. Seeing my gaze, he shifts his plate an inch in my direction. I snag one with a smirk.

“You should totally come. I have two clients this week during the day, and I’ve already shown you all I know of Arrow Creek. Unless you want to see the parking lot where I sleep.”

If I’m not mistaken, *both* Eric and Rhett rumble unintelligibly.

Caiti chokes on her cocktail. “I think we should leave that one up to the imagination. Though we’d love to come to dinner.”

“Perfect. Thursday?” I ask.

Caiti sets down her drink. “Sounds good. But don’t think you’re out of seeing us the rest of the days this week. You can stay in our hotel room while we’re here.”

“I don’t need to share a room with my brother and sister-in-law,” I protest before biting the remaining half of a fajita.

“Then we’ll get you your own room,” Eric supplies.

“No!” I chose a bad time to take a bite of food. Chewing slows down my rapid-fire argument, which gives Eric time to force his side.

“It’s not up for discussion. You aren’t sleeping in your damn car while I’m here.”

“I agree,” Rhett adds, earning my scowl.



“I can’t wait for you to go home so the two of you can’t gang up on me. I think I liked it better when there was a risk of someone throwing punches.”

“This is much more fun.” Eric reaches across the table and nudges my arm.

I won’t admit it out loud, but he’s right. Rhett and I may only be friends who’ve had sex, but having him get along with my brother is a million times more fun than having them fighting across a dinner table. And for all the work I’ve put in lately, a few nights in a cozy hotel room sounds like heaven to me.

I briefly wonder what Eric would say if Rhett stayed the night with me. Then I remember I’m a grown-ass adult and not about to ask for permission. It may be on his dime, but I won’t be fooled into thinking Rhett isn’t planning to pay him back the second he regains access to his accounts. That’s just the sort of man he is. Regardless of whether he’s there sleeping with me.

Evie

THE MUSIC BLASTING through my corded headphones is cut off suddenly by the sound of my phone ringing. I toss down the brush I use for scrubbing grout and tug off one yellow rubber glove. *Rhett* flashes across my phone screen. I manage to swipe before the call goes to voicemail.

“Hey, what’s up?” I sit back on my heels.

“I can’t seem to stop thinking about last night.” His husky voice infiltrates my ear canal and settles in the pleasure center of my brain.

Now that he’s mentioned it, snapshots of sharing the hotel room shower dance in my head. I can almost feel the hot, sudsy water sluicing down my body. The possessive grasp of Rhett’s hands on my hips turning me to face the wall. His fingers diving between my thighs.

“Did you call to tease me?”

“That depends if you’re able to video chat.”

I glance around the empty bathroom. I *am* technically here alone, but this isn’t my house.

“Boundaries, unfortunately. I’m at a client’s house.”

His deep laugh is rich and warm. “That is unfortunate. Actually, I didn’t have a reason for calling. I guess I just wanted to say hi.”

“Are you still coming tonight?” Eric and Caiti fly out tomorrow afternoon. Tonight, we’re all supposed to meet for one last dinner before they go.

“Of course. Unless something’s changed.”

“Not on my end. I wasn’t sure if you’d change your mind. You don’t have to be pressured to go because of my brother.”

His heavy breath crosses the line. “This is no different than you coming to help Nathan and Kiersten move. You’ve met my friends. Now I’m getting to know yours.”

“Except it’s my brother, which is family, and you and I are just friends.”

His lack of response flusters me.

“Rhett?”

“Sorry, Evie. Something just came up at the office. I have to let you go, but I’ll see you tonight.”

“Okay, bye.” I barely get the word out before the call drops, and my music app automatically resumes.

The time I use to clean is usually filled with thoughts and problem-solving, but not today. That phone interaction can be filed into the part of my brain reserved for things that don’t need further analyzing. The loud dance music helps occupy my mind while I slip the yellow glove back on my hand and resume scrubbing.

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TWO HOURS LATER, the obligation for the day is complete. Though my hair is a tangled mess from my efforts and my clothing is wrinkled, the main floor of the house is immaculate. As it should be after a hard day’s work. The wages for today push me one step closer toward that down payment. It’s so close I can nearly taste signing my name on the dotted line.

As I pack away my supplies in my car, Nora’s sleek SUV glides up the driveway. I give a friendly wave and twist my

hair into a presentable messy bun.

She steps out, retrieving a wiggling toddler. The sight of the delighted little boy spreads warmth through my chest.

“I was hoping you’d still be here.”

I snap my stare from her adorable son to her. “Oh? What can I do for you?” I force the confused look from my face before she’s close enough to witness.

“My boss wants to secure you as his cleaner.” She extends a rectangular piece of cardstock to me between two fingers as she glances me up and down. “Give him a call when you’re free to discuss.”

“Wow, thank you for recommending me.” This will be my sixth client. The small circle of my business continues to grow simply due to a random grocery store run-in and word of mouth.

“Do you have a minute to step inside?”

“Oh, um, I have somewhere to be.” Glancing at my watch reveals I have less than an hour to get showered, changed, and drive the twenty minutes to the restaurant.

“Please.” The clipped word gives the impression she doesn’t use it often, if ever.

“I can spare a minute.”

She’s already marching up the concrete driveway to her front door. I follow hot on her heels.

Reentering the house I just spent all day cleaning, it irks me to find she doesn’t remove her shoes. Knowing how much effort I put into these fucking floors, I take mine off with less patience than I had thirty seconds ago. Whatever. It’s her house, and I’m paid for the work I do.

She doesn’t stop or speak until she’s in her office. I haven’t entered this room since that first day as it’s not on her list for me to clean. My keen eye can’t help but notice the shelves in need of a dusting. Maybe that’s what she wants to discuss.

“Nora?” I call when she still hasn’t told me what we’re doing.

Her back faces me. Papers rustle, and drawers glide open and shut. She retrieves a manila envelope in one hand while grasping the squirming toddler on her hip in the other. As she turns back around, a manic look glints in her eye.

“Can you take him?”

“Oh, s-sure.” The twenty-five pounds of toddler settles happily in my arms. I give him a little bounce and embrace the babbling coo he gives in response. Even though my heart cracks, I smile at the little boy.

With her hands now free, Nora plunges one into the envelope. Only to withdraw it seconds later clutching a wad of cash.

“Today’s wages,” she mutters. Her concentration is on the twenty-dollar bills she’s counting and not on my stunned expression. She pushes a haphazard stack across the desk and starts counting to herself again. An equally large stack emerges, and she presses it against the first. “Doubled if you can stay a few hours and watch Tommy.”

I quickly shut my gaping jaw. “I-I’m sorry, what?”

“Can you watch him? Something important has come up, and I’m in desperate need of help. I’ll double your pay for the day if you can stay.”

Double my pay? Is she crazy?

“Nora, that’s way too much.”

Her head snaps up. “Not to me. Your time is worth exactly what I say it is,” she snips.

“I didn’t mean to offend you. I’m sure you can afford what you’re offering, but I can’t accept. It’s too much.”

“What is it with poor people thinking they know the worth of anything?” She mumbles to herself, but I hear her just fine.

“Excuse me?”

She releases a heavy sigh that fills the room with more tension than an overblown balloon. “I’m sorry. I’m in a real jam here. Can you help or not?”

I should say no. My brother and Caiti are leaving tomorrow. It’s already been way too long since I saw them last. Then again, I’m supposed to fly out next month to celebrate Eric’s promotion, and this owed favor may go a long way toward taking the time off. There’s also the pay to consider. I’ll be able to secure a place now, as soon as I can find one, which means getting out of my car a heck of a lot faster than I thought.

This would mean not just canceling on my family but on Rhett too. The four of us won’t have a chance like this for a long while, if ever again.

I’m about to open my mouth to say no when Tommy grabs a loose curl in his chubby fist and lays his head on my shoulder. The little boy nuzzles his face into the crook of my neck. Before I can reconsider, the words, “I’ll do it,” are out of my mouth and into the open.

Nora’s posture deflates. “Thank you. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” She gathers the piles of cash. “Where’s your purse?”

Discomfort prickles beneath my skin. “It’s by the door.”

I follow hot on her trail to the front door. She stuffs the money into the opening on the top of my purse.

“Anything I need to know about taking care of him?” I give him a gentle bounce and rub his back.

Nora leans her torso back inside on her mad dash out the door. “There are leftovers in the fridge. I’m sure you’ll be fine.” Without further instruction, she’s fully out of the house.

I twist the lock behind her. I haven’t cared for a baby since high school. My nerves are on high alert, and she’s barely just left.

“I guess I should officially cancel my plans, huh?”

Tommy yawns against my cheek in answer.

I settle us in a plush recliner in the sitting room and dig my phone from my back pocket. I dial Rhett first, knowing he'll probably ask the least questions.

He answers immediately. "Twice in one day, huh?"

"You called me the first time. Don't make it sound like something it's not."

"Are you saying you don't miss me?" The straight grit in his question sends warning bells to my lower region. Now is definitely not the time to stoke that particular fire.

"Oh, I'd never. That's admitting way too much. Though I have gotten used to your company over the past few weeks."

"Ouch."

I laugh. "Unfortunately, I'm calling to cancel our plans."

A brief pause. "Oh?"

"I've been roped into some extra work for a client. Paid, of course, so I couldn't say no."

The second pause is a beat longer. "I'm glad it's not something serious keeping you back."

"The opposite, actually. With this unexpected money, I think I'm ready to start scoping out a place."

"That's wonderful news, Evie. I'm happy for you." Except he sounds incredibly disappointed.

"Is something going on with you today? You sound upset."

Rhett clears his throat. "No, nothing wrong here."

"You know if you were looking forward to tonight, you're welcome to still meet them for dinner. Is that weird? I'm sorry if that's weird." I'm thankful he can't see the flush covering my cheeks and chest.

"It's not weird. Though I think I'm going to take the time to get some more work done here."

This conversation veers into awkward territory. "Understandable. I have to let them know I can't make it, so I'm going to let you go."

“Will I see you later?”

His question cools the heat of embarrassment but strikes a different flame. “I have the room for one more night, so if you’re open to it, I am too.”

“Not even a question, Rosie.”

“We’re on the same page then.”

“See you tonight.”

“Bye, Rhett.”

Immediately after hanging up, I find my brother’s contact. Just as the phone rings, Tommy twists and tries to climb out of my arms. “Oh, okay little guy. Let me set you down.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking to, but I don’t think that was meant for me,” Eric says in answer.

“Don’t be weird,” I fire back as I walk behind a wandering Tommy. “I have to be that person and cancel tonight. A moneymaking gig fell into my lap.”

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with a certain guy you’ve been sleeping with?”

“Fortunately for your sensitive ears, I can honestly say no. My client was in desperate need of a last-minute babysitter and offered to double my wage for the day if I stayed.”

I follow Tommy into the kitchen. His little fingers wrap around the side of my palm. I swear my heart transforms into a puddle of goo. While leading us to whatever he wants to show me, he yanks on the handle to the fridge as my brother says, “Damn.”

“I should be able to start looking for a place next week.”

“This takes the sting out of you canceling for sure, though I’m going to miss seeing you.”

“Can we meet for lunch? Same place?” I have to release Tommy’s hand to open the fridge and peer inside. The organization is surprisingly immaculate. Labeled containers line each shelf, and I easily spot one that says *dinner leftovers* with yesterday’s date.



Muffled words sound in my ear. Caiti must be nearby.  
“Make it breakfast and in town.”

“Deal.”

“We’ll text you in the morning then.”

“I’ll await the details. I have to go feed this little dude.”

“Have fun.” Eric ends the call.

I toss my phone onto the counter and grab the container.  
“Okay. Looks like green beans, mashed potatoes, and ground hamburger for you. Sounds yummy!”

Upon turning, big, brown eyes peer up at me from knee height. A drool-covered finger disappears into his mouth.

“Are you hungry?”

“Yah!”

I scoop him up and situate him on my hip. He looks into the container. “Do you like green beans?” I pop the dish into the microwave.

“Green beans,” he repeats excitedly. “I want to eat. Green beans!”

The cute sentences spread a smile across my face. While we wait for the food to heat, I sway us to an imaginary beat. Tommy’s squeals turn into high-pitched giggles with each turn.

“Do you like that?”

His answer is another squeal, and he bangs his hands on my shoulders. I execute another twirl. Tommy throws his torso back and screeches happily.

The sound of a gong-like doorbell interrupts my imaginary song and startles me from our dance.

“We should go see who that is, huh?”

Pride swells as I step back into the immaculate foyer. The clouded glass shows a shadowed figure on the other side. Nora didn’t mention expecting company, but it’d be rude not to tell them she’s out for the evening.

With Tommy clutched on one hip, I swing the door open with the other hand. Only to come face-to-face with Rhett.

“Oh. Hi.” Confused surprise colors my tone.

“What are you doing here?” He steps into the house without waiting for my invitation, giving the distinct impression he’s been here before. An unpleasant inkling spikes in my gut.

“Dah!” Tommy lunges with his arms extended in Rhett’s direction.

Dah? As in *dad*?

“I think there’s a misunderstanding here,” I start.

“You think? How long have you known my ex-wife?”

That spike burrows deeper. “Nora is your ex-wife? That means Tommy is...”

“Yeah. My son. I’m not going to lie, Evie. I don’t like this one bit.”

Now that my arms are free, I cross them over my chest in a protective stance. Tentacles of jealousy sprout in every direction. “I don’t even know what’s going on here. I’m sure there’s some sort of explanation.”

“Are you a part of her game?”

“What game?”

“Whatever game she’s playing to keep my son, my money, this f—” He looks at the little boy in his arms. “*Freaking* house from me?” His level tone doesn’t give much away. Tommy rocks happily in Rhett’s arms, none the wiser to our conversation.

“If this is her game, then I’m just a pawn. She’s the client I met at the store. I clean this house.”

“You clean *my* house?” The question sounds like a warning in his deceptively calm voice.

Tommy slaps Rhett’s cheek loudly. “Dah! Green beans, please.”

“I was about to feed him.”

Rhett’s attention flicks from his son to me. “You should go. I’ve got it from here.”

Something inside me cinches painfully tight. An emotion I didn’t know I possessed for this man. Our fun and flirty friends situation suddenly feels like an aching loss.

I slip on my shoes and grab my purse from the floor. “I didn’t do anything wrong.” I look him in the eye as I try to decipher if he feels it too.

Rhett pinches the bridge of his nose with his free hand and closes his eyes. Three seconds tick past before he opens them and releases a steady exhale.

“No... You didn’t.”

The confliction on his face doesn’t jive with his words.

I want to suggest I stay or that we meet later, but before I can, the door flies open, and I’m knocked to the side. My left ankle rolls beneath me. A sharp pain shoots up my calf as I manage to catch myself on the door handle.

“Oh, pardon me. I didn’t know you were standing there.” Nora enters the foyer. She glances back and forth between the two of us. “You’ve met my husband. I’m sorry, I didn’t know he’d be here.”

So many things go through my head, like who the hell doesn’t know where their husband is, but my ankle takes priority. This isn’t my party to crash. If I’ve learned anything about Rhett, it’s that he’ll want to deal with this in private. Even if the jealous part of me wants to demand to know what’s going on.

Tension crackles through the air like the static before a lightning strike.

“What the hell is going on, Nora?” Rhett breaks the staring match, asking my question out loud.

“I don’t know what you mean. I was rushing back to meet you here so we could discuss like you asked.”

“No, *you* asked.” Rhett takes a step forward. “I’m trying to wrap up this ridiculous charade. Why is Evie here?”

I test weight on my ankle, ready to step forward and get Tommy out of here. He’s not my child, but no kid should watch their parents fight.

Nora pulls a self-righteous face. “She’s just my cleaner. What’s it to you what I pay her to do?”

“Do you often leave our son with your hired help?” Rhett fires back.

Ouch.

“She seems trustworthy to me, though I may need to reconsider.” Nora’s face twists in disgust.

I fight back a wince.

“You know what she is to me. You saw the two of us, didn’t you?” Rhett keeps at her.

This conversation gives me whiplash. I wait with bated breath for Rhett to spell out what exactly I am to him.

“The two of you?” Nora looks back and forth between us with a sneer. “That’s a new level of low for you, Rhett.”

“I’m standing right here.” I won’t let anyone trash me to my face. My father raised me better than that.

“You can go.” Nora steps away from the door and sweeps her arm to gesture outside. “And don’t come back. Our contract is void. I can’t have a homewrecker for a maid.”

Her words pierce my chest like a knife. Not that I particularly liked her, but this job nearly got me on my feet. The loss of it will knock me down again.

I step into the open door. “For the record, I didn’t ruin anything. You did that all on your own before I got here.”

“Just go, Evie.”

I’m shocked silent. The blistering demand comes from Rhett. When I force myself to meet his gaze, he glances away and rubs his hand over his lined brow.

As I turn my back and limp away, I tell myself not to jump to conclusions. They clearly have unresolved issues to work through that don't involve me.

That doesn't mean that as I climb in my car and drive back to the hotel, tears don't silently fall down my cheeks the entire way.

His words fucking hurt me.

Rhett

THE WALK down the hall to Evie's room feels like trudging through wet concrete. Each step is leaden. Though it's nothing compared to the weight in my gut. Raising my fist to knock takes more effort than I've ever exerted to announce my arrival. The two pounds of my fists seem inadequate and over the top at the same time.

The door swings open. Eric blocks my entrance with an angry scowl slashing his brows. I'm struck again at the similarities between the siblings. That is, until he opens his mouth.

"You fucked up."

"I know."

"I haven't even left yet, and you already fucked up."

I want to sag in defeat, but I remain rigid in my posture. "I need to talk to her."

"She's had quite the amount of time to contemplate whatever just happened. Are you sure you don't need to take an hour or two to do the same?"

Not what I was expecting from the overprotective bro. "Aren't you supposed to be on her side?"

He laughs without humor. "Sometimes, being on her side is forcing her to see what she refuses to. I only have half a

story here, but I'm thinking that conclusions were rushed to."

I run a hand over the back of my skull. "You could say that."

He silently leans against the doorjamb.

"She won't answer my calls." Three hours and what feels like a hundred texts have passed since I ordered Evie out of that house. The instant she turned her back, I was consumed with regret. The desperation to wrap up my divorce kept my feet planted instead of chasing her like I wanted. Miracle of all miracles, that aspect worked. Now I need Evie to understand the choice had nothing to do with her.

"I suspect not since she's with Caiti, and when she gets going...if you thought Evie's a firecracker, you might not want to see the two of them riled up."

"Fuck," I mutter.

"Yep."

"Are you going to give me your room number so I can talk to her?"

"I don't think so. You need to heed my advice and think on it before you force this conversation."

"Thanks for the help," I mutter. I walk a couple of paces down the hall while Eric watches from the open doorway. Even without hearing his door shut, I know he's still there with his eyes on my back.

I bracket my hands on either side of my mouth. "Evie!" I bellow down the hall.

"Jesus Christ, man. Don't do that."

I turn my head over my shoulder. "You could make it easier by giving me the room number or else I'm moving up a floor."

He shakes his blond head. "You like her a hell of a lot, huh?"

"So much that I'm out of patience." I turn back around and head toward the elevator, ready to shout the fucking building

down until I find her.

“1212!” he hollers at my retreating back.

“You might as well come along unless you want to sleep in a different room than your wife.” If this goes my way, Evie will be sleeping in my bed tonight.

The door to his room clicks shut seconds before his footsteps trail mine.

We both hold remaining retorts until I start to barrel off the elevator on the twelfth floor. Eric steps in my path.

“You better make this right by her. I don’t care how you do it. Even if you have to break up with her, just be a fucking man and don’t jerk her around. Her heart can’t take that. If this other woman means something to you, then leave Evie alone. Don’t think because I’m leaving tomorrow that I won’t hop the first flight back just to kick your ass.”

“I respect you for saying that. Now I hope you’ll return the favor when I say this other woman is my ex-wife and the mother to my son. For that, she’s earned her place in my life, but beyond those titles, she means nothing.”

Eric moves out of my way but remains close behind. Rather than knocking, he uses his own key card to let us inside. Despite our first interaction, I like this guy. His actions prove he has his sister’s best interests in mind.

“What are you doing back?” Caiti stands from one of the queen beds, stopping short when I emerge from behind her husband. “Oh, hell no. You can turn your ass back around where you came from.”

All I can do is hold my hands up as this little five-foot-two, one-hundred-thirty-pound powerhouse barrels toward me. And choke down the laughter rising to the surface. I haven’t been slapped by a girl since high school, and I’m not eager for a repeat experience.

“Call her off, Eric. I have shit to do,” I mumble to her amused spouse. He actually does laugh while intercepting his wife in a bear hug.



“Let them be, baby.” He chuckles close to her ear. From my perspective, she appears to melt in his arms.

The desire to laugh dies as I fixate on Evie. A plastic bag of ice rests on her ankle.

“What the fuck happened?”

Her dull expression stops me in my path. “I tweaked it.”

Tweaked it while fleeing my fucking ex-wife? “Can you walk?”

She nods.

I jerk my head toward the door. “Give me a second, Evie?”

“Sure.”

I wait patiently as she leashes Ghost for a potty break. Either she’s hiding the pain or her ankle isn’t too bad. My stomach pitches when I realize she doesn’t intend to leave with me. And why would she? The only place we have to go is the house she just found out belongs to my ex-wife. As soon as she’s close enough that I could count the freckles on her cheeks if I wanted, I confiscate the lead from her hands.

“Let me help.”

Her despondent demeanor hits me. This is the first time I’ve seen her sullen and quiet like this. Even on the day of the hike, she was vibrant and passionate in sharing her pain. This silent side doesn’t feel like the Evie I’ve come to know.

She walks beside me to the elevator bank. By the time I hit the call button, she still hasn’t spoken, and it twists me up inside. The least she could do is send some of her fiery attitude my way and put me in my place.

My index finger slides beneath her chin, tilting her gaze to meet mine while I press her back against the wall.

“I’m sorry for hurting you.” I force my gaze to remain steady on her gorgeous eyes. While I try to convey the seriousness in my statement, a line of tears catches on her lower lids.

Fuck.

Just as quickly as they formed, she jerks her head to the side, dislodging my point of contact. “Thanks.” She sniffs quietly and tries to duck around me.

“What is that shit?” I bark, losing the tight control on my own emotions. The sudden rush of hurt surprises me. Almost as much as her wanting to get away from my touch.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

The elevator dings as the doors slide open, and I chase Evie inside.

“Like hell you don’t. Don’t hide your feelings from me.”

Evie tucks herself into the back corner. I crave being near her, but it’s clear she wants space. Even if that distance slices me in two.

As soon as the elevator banks, I snag her hand firmly in mine. “Are you sure your ankle is okay?”

“It’s fine, Rhett,” she sighs.

“Come on.”

Without a care to who’s around, I lead her through the lobby and out the revolving doors. Across the blacktop sits an open field, perfect for Ghost to do her business while we talk or fight or whatever it is we’re about to do. I’ll be damned if I let her go to bed alone with whatever she’s feeling. Not if there’s a chance I can fix this chasm I created.

The dry grass crunches beneath our shoes. Ghost precedes us, nose to the ground, oblivious to the crackling tension between Evie and me.

“Talk to me,” I damn near beg.

As if she suddenly remembered we’re joined, she takes her hand from mine under the guise of fixing her hair and tugging up her hood.

“I really don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I want to know if those tears were because of me and how I can help.”

“You can’t help.”

Ghost chooses this moment to stop, and I use it to my advantage. Evie tries to keep walking to God knows where when I have her dog. Right before she’s out of reach, I manage to curl my fingers around her bicep and spin her back.

“You blame me.”

She studies her shoes. “I’m trying not to.”

“You have to know I had no idea she was your client.”

“You made that pretty clear,” she retorts dryly, finally returning eye contact. An unreadable storm churns in hers.

“I was trying to protect you. Nora turns nasty when she wants to be, and I didn’t want you caught up any more than you already were.”

She gazes at the field beyond my shoulder as if contemplating her next words. My fingers involuntarily squeeze her arm in my grip, and she returns her attention to mine.

“I need time to unwind. Not only did I lose my biggest client today, but I realized all the money she paid me actually belongs to you. I told myself I wouldn’t accept handouts.”

“You earned that money,” I growl, not liking the direction of her thoughts. “Doesn’t matter whose checking account it came from. You cleaned that fucking house like she asked.” The image of her on her hands and knees scrubbing my bathroom will haunt me. Fucking, *fucking* Nora.

“And she paid me a ridiculous sum to do so!” Her voice rises. “Now I realize she was just trying to get back at you by throwing your money away.”

Her words spark a memory I need to share. I sway her arm still in my grasp. “It no longer matters. After her ridiculous setup failed, I got her to agree to the terms.”

“Setup?”

Ghost whines, prompting us to keep walking.

“She admitted she saw us the other day. Here, in the parking lot. She orchestrated tonight hoping to ruin whatever it is you and I are doing.”

She bites her bottom lip. “Oh.”

“I also want to know what we’re doing.” The announcement shocks even me, regardless that it came from my own mouth.

“Rhett...” Her voice sounds pained, but like the Evie I’ve come to know, she faces the challenge head-on. “I think we’re just having fun.”

“Is that all you think this is?”

She takes her bottom lip into her mouth again. My fingers itch to tug it free and occupy her fidgeting lips with my own. Her shoulders rise in a shrug. “I don’t know.”

We reach the end of the grass and return to the blacktop. Time is running out for tonight, and I don’t want to leave this unfinished.

“I’m not asking for marriage. You have until my divorce is finalized for that.” I attempt to lighten the mood. “But this is more than having a little fun.”

Putting pressure on her for a definitive answer isn’t going to help, so I let off the gas a little and tap the brakes.

“I have to get back to the house. I left to give Nora time to pack alone, but I’ll be staying with Tommy for the foreseeable future. Can you come by tomorrow so we can finish talking?”

Her head jerks around. “You have him back?”

I can’t contain the grin or the several blinks necessary to keep my eyes dry. “I have my boy back.”

“Why didn’t you start with that?”

The air is knocked from my lungs as she throws herself bodily at me and hugs me tight. I nearly drop the leash in surprise but manage to hang on as I hold her equally firm. From behind her back, I lower her hood off her head and situate my mouth at her ear.

“Because that part is settled, but this isn’t. Starting with I’m sorry was more important.”

Evie pulls back an inch. “But how? How do you know she won’t try something else?”

“The operative word is try.” I brush a wayward strand from her soft cheek. “She’s already made all the wrong moves to get her way and failed.”

“I’m really happy for you,” she murmurs, flicking her gaze to my lips. The attention entices my tongue to wet mine. The Evie I’ve come to know peeks through.

“As much as I’d like to stay with you and celebrate, I have to get back.” My forehead kisses hers for half a second. A moment of contact before I’m unable to pull back. “Will you come by the house tomorrow?”

Her answering nod settles some of the unease. “I’m going to get breakfast with Eric and Caiti. They have to leave for the airport at eleven.”

“Wish them well for me. And give Eric my number in case he needs to check in and can’t reach you.”

Her torso presses against mine. “I will.” A cloud passes by overhead, bathing her in a moonlit glow and highlighting her perfections.

I seal my lips over hers in a demanding kiss, desperate for a single taste after the evening we’ve had. She opens easily, allowing me to claim her ruby lips that drip with smarts and sass.

“I need to go.” I pull back, touching my forehead to hers in order to catch my breath.

Her forehead rocks against mine with her nod.

“You have to go inside, Rosie.”

“What if I don’t want to?” Her words drip with a desire we share. “What if I’m not finished kissing you?”

“Be careful, or the next thing I shove between your lips won’t be my tongue.”

“Is that so?” A lick of her lips follows the husky murmur.

I release a guttural groan in the back of my throat. “I’m not leaving until I know you’re inside, so you’re going to make me late getting back.”

“Sounds like a you problem.”

I slide my teeth along my lower lip to disguise a grin. “An ex-wife problem, to be exact, one I don’t really give a fuck about. The part I do care about is getting to see my son sleeping in his own room for the first time in months.”

“Then I’ll go inside so you can go.”

There’s my Evie. Easy. Simple. Caring about others even with her own problems.

As she releases me to cross the parking lot back to the hotel, a new feeling emerges in my gut. One filling me with the thrill of excitement.

With my ex-wife issues finally falling into place, I’m able to make good on my promises.

Starting with helping Evie out of her fucking car.

Convincing her permanently into my bed is a close second.

And finding out what comes next for us is third.

Evie

THE MORNING AIR brings a hint of summer warmth as a breeze tosses my hair. I wrangle the wild strands into a low ponytail as Eric and I walk the hiking trail once more before he leaves. We traveled about half an hour in before deciding to turn back, not having enough time to reach the end. Caiti waits at the hotel under the guise of packing, but I suspect there's a reason she's not here. Whatever Eric plans to say, she thinks he can persuade me on his own.

Only one topic remains untouched, and discussing my ex doesn't bring me happy flutters.

Birds chirp a melodious tune overhead. I tip my face to the sun and bask in the warmth and the song. Each step brings us closer to a goodbye I'm not ready for.

“What happened with Tate?”

The blunt question doesn't throw me. He and I grew up with a forwardness that frightens most people and the confidence to face confrontation head-on. Except in my case, when I fled across the country when my problems grew too big.

“What has he told you?” What better place to start than discovering what he already knows.

“Not much. When you two broke up, he said he'd let you stay until you could support yourself on your own. Then two

months later, I get a call asking if I knew where you were.”

I snort. “And then you blabbed, so I had to keep the secret from you the second time.”

“Maybe if I had the full story, I wouldn’t have felt the need to tell him where you were.”

The leaves and twigs beneath my feet crunch in answer.

“When I was twenty-two, I saw a specialist for my horrible period pains. Remember when I was a kid, after Mom and Dad died, and I was curled in a ball every month? You and Tate did as much internet research as you could to solve the problem and kept coming into my room with heating pads and water bottles and snacks trying to help.”

“I should have taken you to a different doctor.”

He’d taken me to my primary doctor more than once, but I was told period pain is normal and to take some medicine. We were too naïve to know better, and I got tired of racking up medical bills that Eric had to pay when I wasn’t getting any answers.

“We didn’t know what to do back then, but Tate suggested I go after I moved in with him. The specialist suspected I had endometriosis, so I had surgery to confirm.”

“You what?”

I hold my palm up to him. “I’m not going to run to you with my menstrual problems. When you were my parent figure, sure, but not in my twenties. Anyway, it gets better.”

“Go on.” He pushes a leafy branch out of my path.

I duck beneath his arm and wait for him to come out the other side.

“The procedure confirmed the diagnosis. It spread so much that my chances of getting pregnant were slim. So Tate and I decided right then to try to have a baby.”

“Evie,” he utters darkly, but whether in shock or anger, I can’t be certain. “I’m going to fucking kill him.”



“Don’t act like you didn’t know he and I had premarital sex, dude. I’m not Mother Teresa.”

“You were two kids who decided getting knocked up would help your situation.”

“No.” The word slips from my sharp tongue, effectively cutting him off. “We were two kids who thought they were in love and already planned to get married, so why wait? When the statistics already said conceiving wouldn’t likely happen? Think of it as testing the theory.”

“Look how it turned out? Now imagine if you had a kid in the mix.”

I rub my temples. “I can’t say for certain how an alternate universe would have played out, but if we had a kid, a wedge wouldn’t have grown between us.”

The rock in front of my toe skitters across the trail with my next step.

“I don’t understand.”

“After we tried for a year, Tate settled into the idea that we’d never have kids and we’d enjoy our life together. I did the opposite. I became more desperate. It got to the point we were fighting about it nearly every single day. I fell into a depression while he withdrew completely. And then I did something really stupid.”

Eric pinches the bridge of his nose. I see the opening to the trail up ahead and know I need to hurry this up. He needs to get to the hotel to pick up Caiti, and I have plans with Rhett.

“What did you do?”

I seize his arm and turn him to face me. The pain on my face is unconcealable, and I don’t even try. “You have to understand how desperate I was. After having mine ripped brutally away, I wanted a family more than anything. Whole. Complete. I wanted to hear the word ‘mom’ in my life again and not only when I spoke it at her grave.”

“Evie.” Eric’s voice cracks around my name.

I drop his arm and tilt my face into a warm gust of air. “The specialist mentioned a surgery to remove some of the invading tissue from my reproductive organs. Tate was adamant he didn’t want to go through extreme measures. That if we couldn’t conceive naturally, then it wasn’t meant to be. Obviously, I disagreed.” I draw in a lungful of fresh air before marching on.

“I took the money we were saving for our wedding to pay for the surgery in full. Then I opened credit cards in my name to charge my wedding dress and deposits, thinking he’d be none the wiser. None of which was refundable. I scheduled the surgery when he was out of town for work and lined up a friend to help me.”

“You made a mistake,” he says with understanding.

“I made a *huge* mistake.”

Eric wraps me in a swift hug before I can even react. But my story isn’t finished.

“Not only did I rack up debt that I’m working to pay off, but the surgery wasn’t considered highly successful. The specialist said reoccurrence is likely. I may never have kids of my own. Even after all that.”

“You make me not want to leave.” Eric’s choked reply sends a fresh wave of tears to my eyes. I scrub my cheek against his shoulder, stemming them.

The sigh pulled from me sounds more painful than it is. “But you have to. And I’ll be here, kicking life’s ass day by day.”

“You will be. I’m going to send you some money.”

“Eric, no.” My retort is firm. “I got myself into this mess, and I’ll get myself out. I’m halfway there already.”

“I’ll get you all the way there.” Determination is chiseled in the set lines around his mouth.

I stomp toward the parking lot, not about to have this conversation with another alpha male in my life. Unfortunately for me, he catches up easily.

“If you don’t want help from me, fine, but you need to talk to Tate and demand he pays half.”

“Why would I do that?”

“The two of you were a partnership. It doesn’t matter if it was your mistake. You were about to sign until death do us part.”

I jab my finger into his chest. “Listen and listen good because I don’t want you to leave with us fighting. I made the mistake. I went against what Tate wanted, and I knew the consequences. People are so quick to find someone to share the blame, but sometimes, Eric, there isn’t anyone else.”

“Lord help me,” he mutters to the sky. “You’re too stubborn, and I don’t want to fight with you either. So leave me with some peace and tell me that if you get stuck, you’ll ask for help.”

“You know I will.”

We embrace once more, and I hold extra tight, knowing this is my last hug from him for at least a month, possibly longer if plans change.

“Have a safe flight and give Caiti my love. Tell her to call me when you land.”

With a choppy wave, we climb into our respective vehicles. I throw it in drive and follow Eric’s billowing cloud of dust out of the lot and onto the dirt road, focusing on his taillights rather than the tears that want to fall. When we hit the highway, he turns right toward town, and I go left. With watery vision, I watch him in my rear-view until he blends with the horizon.

Evie

AN INKLING of something unpleasant trills up my spine as I stand on the front steps to Rhett's house. Thinking that phrase feels so strange after cleaning this house for the past few weeks. If I had known...would I have done anything differently? I can't say I would have after receiving her helpful wages. Hurt pride be damned.

The door swings open, a mockery to last night with me outside and Rhett holding Tommy in the foyer. His warm smile chases away any lingering insecurity. He immediately steps back to let me in just as a rumble of thunder groans overhead.

"Puppy!" Tommy exclaims and reaches excitedly for Ghost.

"I hope it's okay she's here. I'll keep an eye on them and make sure he doesn't startle her." I slide off my sneakers and nudge them out of the way of the door.

"Of course," Rhett answers. His voice steals my attention from the baby, and I catch him perusing my body with blatant interest. The black mesh shorts were perfect for a short hike—cool and flowy. The loose tank top is functional though nothing to write home over. I dress for comfort above all else. Though Rhett's expression uncovers no issue with my workout attire.

“I came straight from hiking with Eric.”

“How was it?” He jerks his head toward the hall. The farther we get inside, the more the initial feeling intensifies.

“Liberating.”

Rhett sets Tommy down, who makes a mad dash for his playroom. Our following gait is slower.

“And you? Did last night go okay?” I ask hesitantly.

A muscle jumps in his clenched jaw. My fingers itch to rub the spot. To soothe the tension away.

“She threw in the towel. I won’t believe anything until the judge’s ink is dry, but she said she’s finished.”

My brows dip over my eyes. “Finished? What does that even mean?”

“She packed everything. Her office is cleared out. Her clothes are gone.” Rhett rests his hands on his hips and studies his socks, giving the impression all is not well.

“Isn’t that what you wanted?”

He rubs his palm over his mouth before lifting his head. The hurt in his eyes sends my heart into a tizzy. Oh my God. He wasn’t still in love with her, was he?

“She left Tommy. Fuck, but I don’t think she’s coming back for him.”

His words crack my heart for an entirely different reason. I follow his pained gaze to the adorable little boy smacking a stuffed gray elephant against a rocking horse.

“No,” I whisper.

He keeps his voice low. “She wouldn’t discuss anything pertaining to him. Not custody or visits. I chewed her out for orchestrating that little drama between us, and we fought. Then we talked about the house and money, and I left to give her space to pack. By the time I got back from the hotel, she refused to talk about anything else. Crammed the rest of her shit in her car and drove off.

“I never wanted that for him,” he continues. Nothing I say here will fix the betrayal he feels for Tommy. He needs to get this into the open before it festers into something more. “I’d protect him from her at all costs if I thought she was a danger. I knew she was selfish by the way she cheated on me, but never in a million years did I think she’d abandon her son. What was all this for if not a fight for custody?” The confusion he feels expands in the room until I can feel it too.

“To hurt you.”

“Yeah, well she succeeded.”

“She might come back,” I add carefully.

“I had a lot of time to think last night. After she left, I was pissed, and to get a handle on that, I thought of other things.”

Rhett takes my hand in his warm grip, stroking his finger along the length of mine where they rest along his palm.

“You are a million times the woman she ever endeavored to be. And you do so effortlessly.”

My breath lodges in my throat as his eyes capture mine. The turbulent storm from his clear, replaced with sunny beaches.

“I want you in my bed, Evie. Starting now.”

I bristle. The muscles in my back snap my spine straight. “We aren’t arguing about this again.”

“It’s not about the handout.” His grip tightens around my fingers in a warning squeeze. “It’s about wanting to fall asleep with you lying next to me and waking beside you in the morning.”

I break eye contact to bounce my gaze around the space that up until yesterday belonged to my employer.

“That was her bed. Your marital bed.”

“I’ll burn the damn bed, Evie.”

My hand pulls away next. “It’s not...It’s not just about the bed.” I spin away in order to collect my thoughts without him interpreting my face.

The weight of his hand settles on my shoulder. His voice gentles considerably, and even without seeing his expression, I know it's etched with concern. "Is Tommy a deal breaker?"

"God, no." I turn back to face him reluctantly. "That beautiful little boy stole my heart from the moment I saw him. I didn't know he was yours, but I knew he was special." The vehemence I deliver coats every word. "I might not be able to have kids of my own, but that doesn't mean I can't appreciate the ones around me, no matter how much it hurts."

"I don't want to hurt you." His voice carries an ache.

"Sometimes we have to go through a little pain in order to come out on the other side."

"If it isn't Tommy, then what is it?"

"This is too fast." I gnaw the inside of my lip. "A day ago, I cleaned this house for money. It doesn't feel right being here."

"I'll be damned if I'm sleeping here, and you're in your car." He resurrects our ongoing argument.

"You and Eric should really form a club," I retort dryly with a sarcastic snort.

"It's not funny." Rhett steps closer, and I step back. His irritation magnifies at my move. "I was with the same woman for fifteen years. She fucks that up, and I set off on a revenge screw that turns into many nights with many different women."

My stomach twists an ugly knot at having him spell it out for me after the nights we've spent together. I tamp down the jealousy. He's never hidden the type of guy he was from me, and I never expected him to.

"What's fast isn't you moving into this house. What's fast is that from the moment I saw you, I couldn't see anyone else. Happened like *that*." His fingers snap for emphasis, but I'm lost to his confession to process much else. "Haven't looked at another woman and certainly haven't slept with one since before we met. Hell, someone touched my arm at Calypso's, and I damn near tore her fingers off because she wasn't you."

“Rhett—”

“Would have broken them one by one if I had to,” he growls.

“You really strapped dynamite to this situation and lit the fuse.”

“If it gets you safe with me, I’d power a damn rocket ship if I have to.”

I step back, increasing the space between us. “I need a little time.”

“Did I read this that wrong?” He swishes his index finger between us.

“No. You didn’t,” I rush to reassure him. “But my life isn’t a romance novel. I don’t need the hero with his big bucks to swoop in and solve all my problems. If this is going to be something we explore, I need to know I can stand on my own two feet first.”

“Can you at least park in my driveway while you sleep?”

He deserves some bonus points for trying, but I’m not going to cave, no matter what he says.

“Even though Nora fired me, I still have enough saved for a place. It doesn’t get me out of debt, and I won’t build a savings for a while, but at least I can afford a roof over my head.”

Rhett brushes his thumb across the crest of my cheek, closing the distance once more. “How much do you like me, Evie?”

“A hell of a lot,” I murmur honestly.

“Me too. Which means I’m not giving up on you. I’ll wear that sweet ass down one way or another.”

So distracted by our conversation, I don’t notice Tommy crossing the room until little hands pat my legs.

“Play fwucks?”



Rhett coughs to disguise a laugh. “We’re working on that t-r sound.”

I bend down to speak at his level, and he cups my cheeks in his little hands. My gaze snaps to Rhett’s to find him intently watching the exchange.

“Pwetty,” Tommy says and smiles a toothy grin.

“You trained him for this, didn’t you?” I ask his dad as I scoop the little boy easily into my arms.

“He’s just a smart kid.”

“Well, I’m keeping him.” I smile and sway as Tommy squeals like he did last night. Such an easy kid to please.

My thoughts drift to his mother, and a sadness takes the place of the happy. I hope she can find it in her heart to come back for his sake.

And if not, he might be better off without her. She’ll miss her chance, and a new woman will come along, fitting into Rhett’s side like a puzzle piece.

I’m just not sure if that woman should be me. The two of them deserve better.

Rhett

FOR THE FIRST weekend in a long while, I don't have to participate in the custody charade. That doesn't mean I don't spend hours on Saturday anticipating Nora showing up out of the blue with a change of heart. I can't say I wouldn't welcome it—I'd rather have her involved in Tommy's life than not at all. The woman and I are no longer meant for one another, haven't been for a long time if I'm being honest, but Tommy doesn't deserve her sudden abandonment.

Someday, my little boy will have questions about his mother, and the only answer I currently have is she didn't want him. How fucked up is that? If we're lucky, someone may fill the role, and he'll never know how badly that desertion can feel.

Am I insane for thinking about a certain redhead in this scenario?

The same stubborn redhead who refuses to come over today because she needs space.

I get it. Losing this house and Nora was a huge blow to her income. Seeing the ledger Nora kept and the amount she was paying Evie, I can only thank God they happened to run into each other. Almost as if fate intervened and put Nora in her path, knowing full well Evie wouldn't accept money from me. Somehow, my own accounts ended up funding her security deposit. Never mind the significant chunk Nora took out of

them for other trivial shit. The court can sort out those details later.

After this weekend, I hope we have a lock on her own place and can start the process of moving her in somewhere safe.

If she didn't need her vehicle for transportation, I'd set fire to her car so she can never sleep there again.

A text buzzes my phone while I sit on the floor and play with Tommy. I despise the memories this place holds, but I can't deny the contentment I feel being home with my son. Despite the horrible eyesore décor. Nora hired an interior decorator to fill the space with stuffy pieces she thought elevated our status. Covering the walls in beer posters and naked chicks isn't my forte, but I'd like to sit in my living room without feeling like my jeans might taint the furniture.

Living a simple life for the last however many weeks opened my eyes to a lot of things. One of the most important being I don't need all this extravagance. Not for survival and sure as shit not for happiness. I've made it with minimal clothing, a place to fall asleep, and a good woman at my side to make me laugh.

I bypass the incoming text as the realization strikes hard and fast and find the contact for Nathan.

*Me: Need your real estate agent info.*

He texts back immediately.

*Nathan: Finally! Though if I knew you'd be moving, I would have bought that house for Kiersten.*

*Me: 0/10 would recommend. Needs a heavy dose of sage to clear out Nora's demons. Also twofold question. I'm also needing a hookup for Evie.*

*Nathan: You want to set her up on a date with my real estate agent? He's a little old.*

*Me: No, you fucker. She needs her own place to live.*

The blazing heat I feel at his innocuous text should tell me everything about where I stand with this woman.

*Nathan: She doesn't have one already?*

Shit. I revealed more than I intended.

*Me: Hers was temporary while she settled in. Now she needs somewhere more permanent.*

He responds with the local number. I add the digits to my contacts before tapping over to the other text.

*Evie: Doing my daily rounds before anyone sends out a search squad. Eric and Caiti landed safely. I'm going to Cami's for a few hours to help her deep clean.*

*Me: Appreciate the update. Call me when you're done.*

*Evie: ...space, remember?*

*Me: Hey, you reached out first with your daily agenda. I'm just reminding you where I stand.*

My stance becomes more apparent to me by the minute.

I spent years of my life with one woman. We were young and crazy, and our foundation was based on mutual attraction rather than common interests. We should have grown up together. Our trajectory's proven we only grew apart.

All the women who filled the void were based on mutual attraction too.

The difference I feel with Evie is startling. Attraction brought me to her car in the parking lot, but her humor and zest kept me coming around. The easy banter was a juicy cherry I couldn't resist.

Being single in my thirties means I know more about who I am and what I want. What I don't. Nora's gifted me an extensive list of traits to avoid. The ones that don't mesh with mine.

Selfishness.

Narcissistic.

Compassionless and apathetic.

Nora couldn't be bothered to ask about my day after fifteen years together. Evie's known me a few weeks and tears up at

the thought of my son not having his mom. She cares. She simply fucking cares.

I glance over at my son happily racing cars across the carpet. His sandy hair sticks up in all directions, and remnants of a graham cracker contaminate the corner of his mouth. For months, all I wanted was to be back in this house with him, with his toys and in his space. I finally have what I want, and I can't sit here another minute. Not while something is missing.

“Want to go for a car ride, bub?”

I heft myself from sitting on the floor with the groan all thirty-somethings make. It'd do me well to get back to using a gym before I'm old and rusty. A reminder that I have one in this house, and I plan to give up such a luxury.

Tommy drops his cars. “Yah, Dah.”

I scoop him up with an exaggerated groan. “When did you get so big and heavy?” I ask, pretending to drop him every few steps. His happy giggles settle deep within my soul. I hope I never forget these sounds.

His shoes give him a mighty struggle, and I wait patiently for him to figure it out.

“You did it!” His little hand smacks mine in a high-five.

“I did it!” he screeches and claps his hands.

“Now, let's go to the store.”

Five little warm fingers wrap around two of mine. I lead him to my Jeep and click the buckle into place.

“What we doing?”

A glance in the rear-view reveals him watching the scenery pass by his window. Overcome with a sudden yawn, he stuffs a fist into his mouth. The move reminds me I'm now responsible for his order and routine, something Nora left out in her haste to leave. So far, he's taken the adjustment in strides.

“We're going to get a present for my friend.”

“What friend?” He watches me intently now as I check on him again.

“Her name is Evie.”

“Ebie?”

If he calls her that in front of her, she’s going to melt into a puddle. “Do you remember Evie? She played trucks with you.”

“Ebie play fwucks wif me?”

“How about we buy you a new truck, and you can ask her?”

“Okay.” He reaches for the chest buckle as I put the Jeep into park.

“Hold on there, bub. Wait for me.”

Tommy points his tongue out of the side of his mouth while he struggles with the buckle. Once he figures out the mechanism, I’m in trouble. Unsnapping the top and bottom straps, I step back for him to climb out of the car. I take his hand, and together, we walk into the department store in order to buy our *Ebie* some presents.

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HOURS LATER, after some shopping, a nap for the both of us, and a stop for a meal, Tommy and I anticipate Evie’s arrival in the convenience store parking lot. The little man holds a toy truck under one arm with a look of pride on his little face, his other hand clutched in mine. He chose the red fire engine himself with no arguments from me.

The familiar car races into the lot, coming to a halt in her usual spot. Knowing she intends to sleep here alone sends a dagger into my chest. One that twists every time I fail to convince her of another option.

“Hey,” she greets in a cautious tone, stepping out with her dog. “What are you guys doing here?”

Tommy frees his hand from mine and thrusts his toy at arm's length.

“Did you get a new toy?” Evie drops to a crouch. The new position tempts Tommy forward.

“Ebie play fwucks wif me?” He repeats his earlier question without any prompting from me. I'd say my little man is as taken with this woman as I am. Not that I can blame him. She radiates an inviting personality with ease.

“Of course I'll play with you.” Evie holds out her hand, and Tommy latches on immediately. I relieve her of the leash as we stroll toward the open field.

“You have to know using your son to win me over is a dirty move.” Her scowl falls short of convincing.

“That was one-hundred-percent him. I swear.”

“He called me Ebie.” Her voice drops into a whisper nearly disguised by the swish of tall grass around our ankles. “That has to be the cutest thing I've ever heard.”

I swell with pride and want to bang fists on my chest. My little man scores us a win.

Tommy stops at a random location. The level ground looks as good as any to spread a blanket and relax. Evie and I each settle on a hip, Ghost relaxes at my side with an exaggerated huff, and Tommy immediately starts driving his new truck around our space. Every few minutes, he sets it in front of Evie and waits patiently for her to give the truck a spin before taking it back.

“I brought dinner if you're hungry.”

A soft smile lingers on her lips, though at my question, it drops.

“You should be careful bringing him around me.”

“One meal isn't going to hurt.” Though she isn't wrong, I refuse to concede. Something brews between us. Whether it's a gentle change of the tide or a cataclysmic storm remains to be seen.

“I need space to figure things out, and so far, you’re determined not to give it to me.” She plants one foot on the ground and crooks her knee, resting her elbow there. A breeze captures tendrils of her hair that shine in the setting sun. The candid appearance highlights her beauty.

I wrap my fingers around her delicate wrist. “You have to understand that I can’t just walk away from you in this parking lot and be okay with it.”

“You don’t exactly have a choice. You have to realize you already won me over. The rest is about me.”

“Wanting to take care of you isn’t about winning you over.” I offer her a wrapped deli sandwich on ciabatta bread.

“Buying me things proves there’s a discrepancy. One I’m working hard to minimize so I don’t feel like a freeloader.”

Tommy crawls over and plants himself right in Evie’s lap, curbing the majority of our conversation. I hand him his own turkey and cheese sandwich on sliced bread.

“I don’t see it that way.”

She huffs in quiet frustration. “I’m so close to feeling my own sense of independence. Once I replace the loss of Nora’s business and gain a few more clients, I’ll be there. I can almost taste it.”

“Then why not let me help?” I dig into my own food with a hearty bite.

“I can’t explain it any more than I already have.”

The conversation halts over half-eaten sandwiches and tumultuous feelings. As soon as Tommy drops the remnants of his crust, Evie gives the fire truck a few more passes around the blanket before she stands and wipes her hands on her gray yoga pants.

“Where are you going?” I tuck the loose deli paper packaging back into the plastic bag I brought with us.

She speaks to the horizon. “I’m going to go for a while. Be alone with my thoughts.”



“Wait.” The note of panic in my tone is undisguised. “I brought you some things.” I shake out the plastic bag, and items drop to the blanket. A container of bear spray for predators of the animal or human variety. An alarm for her keychain that screeches ungodly loud when pulled. A spare key to my house so she can come use the shower or hopefully the guest bed.

“Rhett, stop. Please.” Her eyes hold a touch of sadness. “You can’t spend money to fix this. I let you get away with buying me dinner for weeks now, but this is too much.”

I run a hand through my hair, feeling lost. “What good is having money if I can’t use it to help?”

“Maybe you need space too so you can figure that one out. If you think I like you for your money or have been sleeping with you in hopes you’ll be my sugar daddy, you’re dead wrong.” She holds out her hand for Ghost’s leash.

“Whoa, Evie. I never thought that was your intention.” I rise to my feet to stop her.

A sad smile stretches her lips. “Please give me my dog.” Her patience wanes. I reluctantly hand over the leash and tuck my unoccupied hands into my pockets, not about to make a scene in front of my son.

“When can I see you again?”

“I’ll let you know. But for the time being, it’s probably best we remain as friends.”

She removes my access to her as easily as one sheds clothing and diminishes my choices down to one. Wait for her until she’s ready.

Because I sure as fuck won’t give up without a fight.

Evie

OMINOUS, dark clouds float low overhead as Ghost and I crest the top of the cliff. A less impulsive person would have glanced at a weather report before taking a hike a few hours long. Instead, I'm too busy fleeing the memories of last night to pay enough attention. I tip my face to the darkening sky. There's a probable chance we'll be returning in the rain.

As much as I'd like to stay and admire the view—the contrasts of grays and browns coloring the expanse of cliffs and water and sky—I turn on a heel and begin our trek down to outrun the storm.

Over halfway down, the thoughts continue to pummel me. My feelings for Rhett grow like a plant reaching for sunbeams. I kick a rock from my path while recalling the startled butterfly wings in my stomach at his laidback smile or whispered commands. The way he calls me Rosie when he's flirting and turned on.

Without Rhett, I don't know if I would have been strong enough to remain in Arrow Creek. A few pleading phone calls from Eric and Caiti would have broken me down in a matter of days to weeks. But those dark nights sharing a meal, a front seat, liberating our demons and revealing our dreams, brought us closer while allowing me to heal from the mountains of guilt I've been harboring.

The problem is I'm still not where I need to be. I relied on a man for most of my adulthood for support, and when I left him with nothing but my dog and my belongings, I vowed not to fall headlong into that path again. Now my options feel thinner than a papercut.

Either allow Rhett to help me get on my feet or push him away until I'm ready, hoping he sticks around until then.

The crazy feelings soaring to life when he's near scream option one, even though I've learned the hard way that fairy tales aren't reality.

Those same crazy feelings whisper he'll be waiting if I choose option two.

But will he?

With the way I left him and Tommy last night, I guess we'll eventually see.

A warm droplet lands on the bridge of my nose, a foreshadow of what's to come. Ghost and I break into a hustle while the rain escalates in frequency. The warm summer droplets quickly turn cold as the temperature plunges with the storm front.

The trailhead appears a few hundred feet in the distance as the first crack of thunder rings out. Ghost lets out a startled bark as we sprint for shelter. I slip across a wet, flat rock—a warning to ease my pace. Falling out here in the rain and breaking my neck doesn't sound like a good idea. The recognizable song I set for Eric's cell jingles from my phone in my back pocket, barely heard above the storm.

I let it go to voicemail, feeling an instant punch of guilt for not picking up when he's so far away. I usually don't miss a call.

The immediate call back stutters my heart. Even running through the rain, I dig the device out and punch the answer button.

“Hold on, I'm running through a rainstorm and nearly at my car.”

Silence greets me from the other end, and I take the lack of sound as an indication of patience. I dig my keys from my pocket as a quiet sniffle reaches me.

“Eric? Are you there?” I raise my voice to be understood above the torrent of rain. Looking down at my clothes, I smile at the soaking wet mess.

Before I can get the door open, a single word stops me dead in my tracks.

“*Evie.*”

The pure agony laced through my name slices me right open.

Rhett

A BOOM of thunder tightens the coil of tension in my gut. The sizzle of lightning that swiftly follows turns my grip on the door to white-knuckled. I lean half out of the foyer, gazing at the tree line at the end of the driveway as if I can conjure her to appear. A text steals my attention from the vacant concrete.

*Law: Cami says she hasn't spoken to her today.*

I lower my phone to my side in a grip so tight I could crack the thing in half. Hours have passed since Evie text me about going for a hike. I left her alone, knowing how peaceful nature can be to tumultuous thoughts. A small part of me hoped she'd take the time alone to sort out what she wants for us. The other was just glad she'd texted me her plans at all after how we left last night.

In an attempt to quiet my own deliberations this morning, I played with Tommy, fed him lunch, and laid him down for a nap. The moment rain started pinging off the roof, I sent out a string of texts. I asked her to come over rather than ride out the storm in her car and promised I wouldn't beg her to stay after the weather cleared.

Silence greeted me.

Thirty minutes have trickled by since and each minute beyond drags me further into a type of worry I've never experienced. I'm one of the lucky ones. Loss hasn't touched

me except in the form of adultery and divorce. This situation and the status of our relationship have me pondering the course of action least likely to overstep. The fear induced at her lack of response makes it impossible to think straight.

A nasty gust of cold air pushes forward, and I step back inside with a clear decision. She might be wanting a bit of peace, but ensuring her safety is my priority. The trail isn't for beginners. Add in wet rocks and a torrent of rain, and there's a strong possibility she's hurt somewhere.

The fifteen-minute wait between asking Law to bring Cami over and their arrival sends my heart into overdrive. My hands ache from the number of times I've clenched them. Every rumble of thunder and flash of lightning heightens my apprehension until I'm about to sprint out the damn door. Only the thought of my son fast asleep in his bed holds me back.

The sound of tires approaching propels me out the door, throwing my arms into the sleeves of a water-resistant coat. Law's truck pulling up the drive doesn't quiet the static noise bouncing around my skull. An instant disappointment eclipses any hope that maybe she'd arrived after all.

"Tommy's down for his nap," I shout to be heard over the rainfall.

Cami rushes through the rain toward me. "Go. I've got him." Worry creases her face in lines.

"Nathan's heading out too," Law says as I pass by on the way to my Jeep parked next to him.

"Tell him to head for the hiking trails. We'll meet him there."

Law nods and hops back into his truck.

I climb in my Jeep, crank the engine, and back my way down the driveway. A short pause is all I give before backing into the road and taking off, Law following close behind.

Halfway down the road, I crank the heat, warming the car for the possibility she's been out in the cold for a while. Wipers at high speed send the water sluicing away in all directions, but my visibility remains nonexistent.

My fingers twist the fibers of the steering wheel as I drive by the place we met. The likelihood that her phone died and she's riding out the storm is slim. Even with a request for space, she'd come to me during inclement weather. She knows me well enough to know I'd come looking if she didn't. Hell or high water. Literally.

"Fuck," I growl, hearing a ping from hail hitting the roof. Could this get any worse? Thinking about the possibilities gnaws my stomach in answer. Fucking yes, it could.

She could be hurt.

She could be lost.

I might not be able to find her.

She could have left.

The last one forces my foot harder against the gas pedal, the engine revving at the burst of speed.

She wouldn't leave me. Not without telling me. Not without speaking her mind in that easy-going way she has about her.

But the alternative is she's injured, so for the moment, thinking she simply left is easier.

The last turn to the trail appears suddenly, disguised by the sheet of rain pouring around me. A sudden burst of lightning streaks across the sky, illuminating the entrance. I crank the wheel and direct the Jeep up the modest slope, leaning forward in my seat as if the new position will enhance my visibility.

The white Lexus is the only car in the lot. The passenger side faces me, but the rain obscures any occupants inside.

I slam my shifter in park fifteen feet away, not caring about running the remaining distance. The engine purrs beside me as I take off in her direction. Water pummels my face, trickling down my neck beneath my hood. The cool droplets do nothing to stave off the hot worry simmering beneath my skin.

I don't need to cup my hands against the window to tell it's unoccupied. I do anyway, a hollow ache at finding it empty.

My gaze follows the direction of the trail we hike as I round the hood, coming to an immediate halt when I glance the other way.

“Anything?” Law asks above the sound of rainfall.

“Evie!” I roar, the chains on my emotions falling free at finding her.

Propped with her back against the driver’s side of her car, her pale face tips to the drenching heavens. Her closed eyes and the tint of her normally pink lips send a spike of fear from head to heel.

Gravel pops beneath my shoes as I skid to a stop and drop to my knees beside her. Rocks stab into my knees through my jeans, but the sensation hardly penetrates the fog of fear.

“Are you hurt?”

Her teeth chatter behind blueish lips. Her head rolls to each side once in what appears to be her answer before she changes direction, nodding her head forceful and continuous.

“Yes!” she screams, instantly tearing my heart into two at the obvious anguish. Her fisted hands punch the solid ground on either side of her while she draws her knees to her chest.

“Baby, Rosie, stop. Stop!” I command, needing to break through to her. I grab her soaking hoodie and haul her into my chest, wrapping her tight. “What’s happened?”

“He’s gone,” she divulges in the barest whisper. A clap of thunder punctuates the finality of her words.

“Who’s gone, baby?” I ask gently, already forming the answer in my gut without her confirmation. A crack of lightning precedes her response.

“Eric. H-He *died*.”

Fuck. I curse repeatedly in my head. The unforgiving thorns of compassion burrow deep with her words. She’s going to need a lot more than a warm shower to wake up from this nightmare, but priority number one is persuading her to get out of the rain before she ends up in a hospital bed.



“I’m so sorry, baby.” The raspy, inadequate words float between us. “We need to get you dry.”

“I don’t want to go,” she chokes out between sobs. “This is the last place I saw him alive.”

Her pain eviscerates me.

“We can come back after the rain. We’ll come back a thousand times,” I vow. “Come on, Evie.”

She glances at me, tear-soaked cheeks disguised by the falling rain. “I don’t think I can.”

As the angry storm whips around us, she no longer has a choice. I can’t do anything to help Eric, but I can do something to help her. The color of her skin and uncontrollable shaking convince me she’s in danger of hypothermia.

“Where’s Ghost?” Maybe changing her attention to someone else she loves will help break through.

“She’s near. I have her leash.” The sodden piece of material hangs limp angled behind her.

Law crouches down to peer beneath the car. “She’s hiding. Let me get her to my truck.”

Evie relinquishes the leash without a fight. As Law loads Ghost up, I free my cell and punch Nathan’s contact info.

“What do you need?”

“Change of plans. We got her. She’s been sitting in the rain for over an hour. Get over to my place. We need blankets and warm fluids. And I need Cami.” I break through the constriction in my throat. “Her brother died.”

“Ah, damn. I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Can you ask Cami if she’ll help? If it’s too painful...” I let the statement trail. Cami lost her brother a long time ago. Knowing she pushed past her pain to become the woman she is today fills me with hope. Maybe she can support Evie through the same.

“She’ll help,” Law states firmly upon his return, knowing the woman he’s loved since they were kids like his own right

hand.

“Any medic skills might be needed as well,” I speak back into the phone.

“We’ll be ready,” Nathan responds in an even tone.

“Be there as soon as I can.” My throat nearly closes on the last word as the mountain before us reveals the treacherous climb. Evie’s going to need people to rally, and I’m thankful I have a group ready to take up the task. Good people. The best. The kind that will love and support her through it all.

Running back through the downpour reveals her in the same position. Her vacant stare hardens my determination to help. I won’t stop until she’s back to the Evie I’ve come to love.

That realization blasts through the brick wall I’ve constructed around my heart.

Brushing those thoughts aside, I situate one arm behind her back and the other beneath her knees, lifting her securely into my arms.

Rather than fight, she cries and buries her face in my hood.

“It hurts,” she whimpers through the tears.

“I know, baby.”

“E-Everything hurts so bad.”

“I’ve got you,” I vow. Law has the passenger door to my Jeep open before we’re close. I deposit her safely inside. “Hang on, Evie.”

“Meet you back at the house,” Law says.

“Thank you,” I manage to say, grateful for my friend though my attention is elsewhere.

The heavy slam of my door once I climb inside mutes the thundering storm. Evie’s uncontrollable chattering fills the confines of my Jeep and prompts me out of my clothes. I toss the dripping jacket into the back.

“Lift your arms. We have to get you out of these clothes.”

She participates by limply lifting her arms with as much strength as I assume she can muster. She's been in this cold rain for a while, and I know from experience it doesn't take a snowstorm to become hypothermic. Weakness will set in along with muscle cramps if we don't get her warmed up.

I ease each arm out, then pull the sopping material over her head. The sweatshirt lands with a splat on the floormat. My dry sweatshirt, warmed by body heat, comes next, and I immediately place it over her head and cover her shoulders. With a bit of modesty protected, I unsnap her bra from the clasp in the back.

"Rhett!" She gasps, the word a minuscule break through her fog.

"You need dry clothes. Put your arms in," I order in a voice intended to prevent any arguments.

She carefully threads each arm through while I grab my jacket and hop back out into the rain. When I open her door, her head jerks to the side. The wide-eyed stare drives a stake into my heart. I cup her cold cheek, brushing away the wetness of lingering tears mixed with raindrops.

"I need to remove your pants. Can you help?"

A sharp nod provides the permission to curl my fingers into the waistband and pull.

"Lift your hips for me."

She provides assistance. The wet material clings to every curve on the way down, making the task twice as difficult. One at a time, I remove her shoes and socks, pressing a soft kiss to her thigh as I do so. Once free of the cold items, I point the vents in her direction.

"Hang on. I've got you."

As I turn to leave, she suddenly grips my wrist with a strength that belies her condition.

"Don't let go," she pleads.

"You're stuck with me now." I lock eyes with her, delivering as much fortitude as I can muster.

Those spoken words seal my destiny. I don't plan on going anywhere.

Evie

MY EYELIDS CRACK OPEN, brittle and dry from the mix of tears and rain. A drum pounds a rhythm in my skull as the car comes to a complete stop. Seconds pass as the familiar tree-lined drive penetrates my consciousness.

Followed swiftly by a sharp pain in my chest with the returned memory of the phone call.

Fresh tears slip warmly down my cheeks while a new sob shakes my shoulders. My door opens, drawing my attention away from the agony ripping a perpetual hole into my soul. Nothing will ever fill what the loss of Eric leaves behind. Cami waits beside the Jeep, holding open a massive brown blanket. Loose strands of her brown hair stick to her forehead from the rain.

“Can I help you?” she asks, her voice frank and businesslike, as the paramedic side of her dominates the part of her that’s become my friend.

“Y-Yes,” I croak and shift to climb out. Cold rain pelts my bare legs, but Cami’s there in an instant, covering me with the warm blanket. Rhett joins her before I can step out and relieves her of the task. He tucks the blanket securely around me, embracing me in a bear hug and wrapping my legs snug around his waist.

“I don’t want your feet to get dirty,” he murmurs in my ear.

The energy required to respond is depleted. I close my eyes and allow the gentle sway of his steps to lull me. A numbness spreads beneath my skin like a barrier, and I welcome the change from the constant pricks of grief perforating me.

“Bring her into the guest bath,” Cami says, her voice trailing us.

Rhett sets me gently onto the closed toilet lid. I spare the room I cleaned on my hands and knees not long ago a quick glance, but I feel nothing. Not shame. Not anger for losing this client, or fear for surviving on my own. Nothing other than the gaping hole where my heart used to be.

My brother is gone.

“I’ve got her,” Cami says softly and shoos Rhett away.

His lips connect with my forehead in a lingering kiss. The spot in the center of my head continues to tingle after he pulls back. He lifts my chin, pinning me with his sorrow-filled eyes.

“I’ll be just outside, okay?”

A jerky nod is the most I can manage. My vocal cords still burn from screaming my anguish in the rain.

Cami works around without my help. She takes my vitals with efficiency and speed.

“Your temp is low, ninety-three degrees. I think we can manage warming you up here. Are you feeling all right physically?”

“I’m tired.”

“I know.” She lays her hand over my shoulder.

“There’s so much to do. I have to get my car. I need to get on a plane right now. I have to help somehow.” Hot tears prick my eyes. “Caiti needs me.”

“We’re going to help you, okay? I’ll get Kiersten on the phone with the airline to book you a flight. We can watch Ghost until you’re able to come back, and if you leave your

client list, I can call and let them know you need to leave town for a bit.”

Her willingness to take charge quiets some of my anxiety. I nod and let my attention flit away. The door opens, but I’m lost to memories. Caiti’s waterlogged voice on the other end of the phone delivering news I never thought I’d hear. Plans for the future quashed in an instant while a new tangent for my life forms. Losing my parents was sudden, and I thought that was hard.

But Eric was my lifeline. How does a person live without their lifeline?

Cami returns quickly with a stack of clothes in her hand, reminding me of the cold residing within my bones. I’ve been shaking for so long I can’t differentiate between the emotions or the chill. My muscles ache from the relentless shivering.

“Let’s get you into something warm and dry. I have soup ready, and heaters are running in the guest bedroom so you can eat and sleep.”

“How can I sleep when I’m already dreaming?”

A sigh slips free. Cami sets the folded clothes on the edge of the vanity and plucks a men’s hooded sweatshirt from the top. “You aren’t dreaming, honey. It takes a while to adjust, but you’re going to get through this.”

I dash away a tear with the back of my hand. “You can’t possibly know that.”

She helps me change out of the top Rhett slid on me with clinical efficiency. Taking my hand, she encourages me to stand. With the hem of the sweater covering my bottom, I pluck my wet panties from my skin and let them drop to the floor. As she extends a pair of men’s sweatpants, it hits me that these are Rhett’s clothes. The thought soothes a bit of the heartache.

“My brother died from leukemia when I was pregnant with Evelyn, and I’d lost my parents before that,” she shares tenderly. Her eye contact remains steady. “Everyone is

different with their grief. When you find that something that makes you feel close to him, it gets a bit easier.”

“Did you find something?”

“I did. And you will too, honey. But it isn’t going to be today.”

“Oh, God.” I choke on a gut-wrenching sob, wrapping my arms around my abdomen. “This isn’t going to stop.”

“Shh, I know.” Her arms encircle my shoulders. “Let it out.”

The door to the guest bathroom bursts open and bangs against the wall behind it, startling us both. Rhett enters with a fierce look of determination on his face.

“My turn.”

Cami turns me easily into Rhett’s outstretched arms. I don’t have an ounce of combative energy left in my body.

“I’ve got you.”

We only need to maneuver around one corner before I’m in the guest bedroom. The scent of vanilla and smoke from a nearby candle gives me something else to focus on. Cami must have lit the wick and turned down the covers in preparation for my arrival. Rhett leads me to the queen-sized bed where I sit heavily on the plush mattress.

“You’re not wearing socks.”

Not needing my confirmation as he can see clearly for himself, Rhett opens a set of drawers and returns with a thick pair tucked in a ball.

“I moved in this room the day I found out Nora was cheating on me. I’m glad to see she didn’t trash all my shit when I moved out.” He talks as he slides the thick material over each foot. His gentle touch stirs my slumbered feelings for him, and when he squeezes each foot in a hand, my heart jolts. “Up you go.”

He helps lift my legs and pulls a heavy gray duvet over my lap before sliding a tray within reach. Steam curls into the air



from the hot bowl of a cream-based soup.

“You need to eat. Are the heaters too much?”

“They feel great.” I burrow into the fluffy mattress as the penetrating warmth brings along the fog of sleep. My heavy lids close.

The bed dips with Rhett’s weight. He fits himself behind me, legs bent so we’re touching from top to toe. One arm slips beneath my head, and the other wraps snug around my middle. He fiddles with a strand of hair fanned on the mattress.

“Whatever you need, I’m here,” he murmurs.

My breath hitches. “I know.”

“Nathan and Law are on their way to pick up your car.”

“Thank you.”

“Kiersten found us plane tickets for tomorrow. We’ll confirm with Caiti later after you’ve had some rest.” He goes on without waiting for my response. “Whatever Caiti needs too.”

“I can’t talk about this right now.” Or ever. This has to be a nightmare even though, deep down, I know it isn’t. Grief changes a person swiftly and without mercy. There’s no taking that sort of news back. No number of *I’m sorrys* will rearrange the gaping hole left behind. All I can do is place one foot in front of the other. One step at a time.

The rest will fall into place. Whatever that may be. Except I can’t see more than five minutes into my future because each time I try to think beyond that, the pain rears its ugly head and shows me all the happy and sad things in my life Eric will miss.

Rhett doesn’t respond. His arm cinches tighter, and his lips press firmly against the back of my head. I ride the feeling of his heavy inhale against my back. I focus on his steady breaths, allowing the rhythmic motion to quiet the storm for tonight.

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AS THE FIRST rays of dawn bled through the open curtains this morning, I snuck out of bed and turned off Rhett's alarm an hour before it was due to sound. Cami had already taken Ghost home with her in preparation for us to leave, so my priorities were sorted. I drove myself to the airport without Rhett and haphazardly shoved items from my car into a carry-on. Caiti needs me without distractions, and bringing Rhett along would allow my own pain to engulf me.

I need to remain strong.

A swoop of turbulence sends my heart into overdrive. My fingers grip the armrest, and I close my eyes until the flight resumes the smooth cruise. The stale recycled air prompts a headache to form. I should sleep the remaining hour until we touch down at Denver International, but I can't smother my racing thoughts.

I wiggle my phone from my pocket and reread the text Caiti sent me late last night for the hundredth time.

*Caiti: An aneurysm or a heart defect is their best guess until the autopsy comes back. I can't sleep without picturing him next to me. What if he tried to wake me, and I didn't hear him?*

If the text is any indication, she's haunted by her thoughts. We went back and forth late into the night as Rhett snoozed curled behind my back. I reassured her there was nothing she could have done, but I have a feeling my words failed to impact.

Exiting that thread, I scroll down one conversation to read the message I sent to Rhett this morning.

*Me: I need space to process, and I need to be there for Caiti. I'm sorry I left without you, but it's for the best. Please don't call.*

The succinct words drive my point home, or so I hope. He didn't reach out before I boarded, so either he was still asleep

or he honored my wishes. Either way, a bitter pill of guilt sours my gut. And even though only a few hours have passed, I miss him already.

God. The ghostly sensation of his strong arms around me twinges my sides. Regret whittles my heart like a carving knife. I'm torn between riding out my hasty decision or begging Rhett to hop on the next flight as soon as I regain cell service.

The ding of the seat belt sign signals our descent. A few silent prayers later, we safely touch down in Colorado. The desperation to find Caiti singses my manners and rushes me off the flight out of turn, grumbles of other customers chasing me down the aisle.

My carry-on dangles from wilted fingertips as I scan the masses. Her shiny black hair bobs behind an elderly gentleman's shoulder, followed by the rest of her when the man moves in another direction. Complete control is lost at the sight of her. My feet carry me in a near sprint along her path.

We cling to one another with shaking limbs. Our reunion is bound to end up viral on social media. I find myself unable to care as I clutch my only remaining family member like a lifeline. Tears break free from the gates holding them back all morning, and I cry into her silken hair. Inadequate words of condolences and sorrow lodge in my vocal cords. Incalculable time passes before a broad figure interrupts.

I lift tear-soaked cheeks and find myself staring at the face of my ex-fiancé, Tate.

Tall, broad, and muscular, he looks as good as he always has, though I immediately notice the absence of something deeper. His attractive features do nothing for me. A welcome thought mingled with the rest of the chaotic emotions.

"We should move this to the car," he advises thickly.

A nod follows a hitched sob. Caiti loops her arm with mine, and with tears still streaking our cheeks, we walk out into the sunshine.

“Where’s Rhett?” Her hoarse voice slices the remainder of my heart into ribbons.

“Oh, Caiti,” I sob, the heartache at missing him increasing with each mile Tate drives us away from the airport. “I didn’t let him come.”

Her huff holds soggy disbelief. “How did you manage that one? When we confirmed details yesterday, he seemed ready to take on the world for you.”

The memories of his tenderness submerge me further into this depression.

“I snuck out this morning before he woke up,” I confess and trap my lower lip between my teeth. The sting does nothing to calm the remorse. “Once I was in the air, I realized how badly I wanted him to come with me.”

“Evie...” Her watery sentence trails off. She glances discreetly at Tate in the driver’s seat, seemingly oblivious to our quiet conversation in the back.

“I can’t keep running. I don’t know why I did, but I wish I could go back to this morning.”

Caiti takes a shuddered breath. “I think you’re falling for him.” Her voice cracks at the end.

“Shh, honey, we don’t have to talk about this.” I drag her into my arms in order to buy time. This discussion is on my list of topics to avoid. For my sake and for hers. She just lost the love of her life, and my feelings are too confusing to admit in the open.

“You don’t want to waste any time.” The passion in her voice is startling. So much so, I swallow any retort. The topic files easily away to revisit later when I’m alone.

Her head fits into the space beneath my chin, and I hold her tight.

“Tell me about your plans.”

“Eric would hate a memorial service.” She grimaces. “He mentioned once that the idea of an open casket freaked him

out and made me promise to have him cremated, so that's what we're going to do."

I have to let out a slow, steady breath before I can ask my next question. I have no doubt she can feel the heavy rise and fall of my chest.

"Are we going to spread his ashes?"

She shakes her head against me. "He isn't ready yet. I want to do something now while you're here. Something that feels right in honoring the man he was."

"I can stay as long as you need me." My arms twitch in a punctuated squeeze.

"I'll be flying back to Germany in a few days. Sorting up our life together isn't something I can do in a short span of time. You have to return to your own life. Once I'm ready, I'll move back to the States and stay with my parents for a while until I can get back on my feet."

"You're welcome to stay in Arrow Creek with me."

"I know."

The ache in my chest grows as I think about all the tasks she needs to manage. "I'm here for you. Please let me know if there's anything I can do to make it easier."

"This is it." She huddles deeper into my hold and wraps her arm around one of mine. "This is all I need from you. He was your brother. You're mourning him equally as hard as I am. At least this way, we can honor him together."

I blink away a sudden onslaught of tears.

"He would love that."

Rhett

PARKED across the street from Calypso's, I hold my cell to my ear. The guys dragged me out for drinks, knowing damn well it's a failed endeavor. Evie's sudden departure was a blow I didn't expect, though not a surprising one considering how she rolled into town. She might be a chronic runner, but I have no doubt she'll return to me.

And I'll be ready.

"Hello?" A man's voice answers cautiously. Calling this number is a last-ditch effort. I take a deductive guess who's on the other line.

"Is this Tate?"

"This is, but this isn't Tate's phone."

"I'm calling to see if Evie's there safe." She left without me and took my beating heart with her. I only hope she remembers to bring it back in one piece.

Tate clears his throat. "I'm going to assume since your name came up on the screen that Eric knew who you are to his sister. Do you mind telling me who you are?"

"I'm her boyfriend." I detect no lies from my side. She might subscribe to a different story.

"That so? What boyfriend doesn't take a cross-country flight to his girlfriend's brother's memorial?"

I rub a fist against my sternum. “It’s complicated and up to her if she wants to share.”

“My best friend died, so don’t take this as me being a douche when I say I’m not sure that answer is good enough.”

“The problem with that statement is what concerns her doesn’t have to be good enough for you. Not anymore.”

A long pause follows from his end. “She’s here,” he confirms.

“She good?”

“Do you want to talk to her?” A hint of bitterness is detectable in his tone.

I run my palm over my mouth, ignoring the stab of hurt. “She needs her space. As long as I know she’s safe, I can give it to her.”

“Okay.” He draws out the sound. “Do you want me to let her know you called?”

“No. What I want you to do is give me your word you’ll look out for her.”

He huffs a humorless laugh. “I don’t know if she told you what happened between us, but if she did, I can’t imagine you’d be making that statement.”

“She did,” I confirm, bracing for where he’s going with this.

“Then you realize I’m in a position to work things out with her while she’s here and away from you.” Her ex can’t hide the slightly smug note, grief over his best friend be damned.

I nearly snarl. “I think if you’re any sort of man, you’ll realize using her vulnerable position as a way to win her back is a fucked-up move. *Especially* after what happened between the two of you.”

“I guess we’ll see how much you trust her. You might regret letting her go without you. I know I do.” He says the last part quietly, but I hear him loud and clear.

The difference is he let her leave his life, pushed her toward the door even. She didn't give me much choice. Leaving the way she did staved off an argument but left me with more questions than answers.

"Thanks for confirming she's safe. I mean that. But if you so much as try to change her mind about you, you won't win."

I pull my cell from my ear and end the call. My fingers twitch to pull up her contact and reach out again. She made it clear with her departure that she needed this time alone, and who am I to deny her that?

I told him I trust her. That remains true. What I don't trust is this guy's sleazy intentions.

Before I break my promise and send her a string of texts, I tuck my phone in my pocket and climb from my Jeep. A drink will give me time to clear my thoughts and decide what to do next.

A quiet hum of chatter greets me along with a blast of air-conditioning. The smell of beer and fried food is like a beacon welcoming me home. I expected a Thursday night to be busier. I easily spot Law and Nathan sitting at the bar and chatting with Dane. A smirk slides into place. A little over a year ago, I wouldn't have imagined these two getting along so easily. Goes to show how much things can change.

My own life is a testament.

The scrape of a stool against the floor announces my arrival, and three sets of eyes swing in my direction. A whiskey slides in front of me without invitation.

"Hey." Nathan greets me first, stretching out a leg.

Law knocks twice on the bar top. "Glad you could come out for a bit."

"Kiersten and Cami all but booted me out for the opportunity to spend time with Tommy."

"What's the story there?" Dane puts in. He dries a highball glass with a crisp white towel.



“What story where?” I toss back and take a sip. The whiskey heats a path down my throat, warming the ice in my gut from the phone call.

“You. Tommy. The divorce.”

I lean back and crook an elbow on the gleaming bar. Do I chalk it up to talk or use it as an opportunity to come clean to my friends?

At my reluctance, Dane persists. “People talk, man. Supposedly, Nora’s moved in with her boss, and there’s talk about them transferring to a branch in Florida.”

“News to me,” I mutter, noting that it isn’t unwelcome. None of her decisions in this have been forced or influenced by me. She’s made her choices of her own damn free will.

“Where’d you hear that?” Law asks.

“Her boss’s secretary was in the other day with some girlfriends. She couldn’t keep Nora’s name out of her mouth. Or yours.” Dane smirks at me.

“Fuck off.”

Dane chuckles. Nathan eyes me critically.

“You did mention needing my real estate agent’s name. I don’t get that.” He drinks quickly from his beer. “The two of you shared that big fucking house, which I get probably wasn’t too hard not to see each other with the size of that thing, but the second she moves out, you sell.”

“I wasn’t living there.” The truth spills past the gates with startling ease.

“You what?” Law pauses with his highball glass near his mouth. “Where were you living then?”

I’ve put this conversation off for long enough. “When I couldn’t find a warm bed to occupy, I slept at the truck stop.”

“You’re shitting me,” Nathan grits out. “I had two fucking houses!”

“Me too,” Law adds.

“One was being built,” I mutter to Law. “And you were busy with your new family.”

Nathan shakes his head at my lame excuse. “We’re your friends. That’s crap.”

“Yeah.” I roll my glass between my palms and study the dark grains of wood running the length of the bar. “Wouldn’t have met Evie, though.”

“You’re not saying...” Nathan lets the thought trail off.

“Yep. Met her there too. We developed a fast friendship sharing meals and sleeping in our cars next to each other.”

Law sips his drink and smacks his lips together. “You ever let Cami and Kiersten know that, and they’re going to go ballistic on your ass.”

“I don’t intend on it, and you shouldn’t say anything either. Evie’s embarrassed to let anyone know.”

Nathan pushes his empty bottle toward Dane. “How’s she doing, by the way?”

“I haven’t spoken to her yet. She wants space, and I intend to give it to her.”

Law snorts. “When Cami took off on me, I had to wait fourteen years to get her back.”

“Helpful,” I grunt. Dane grabs the bottle of whiskey and angles it above my empty glass. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” Dane swaps the bottle in his hand with another glass that needs drying. “Do you really think she’s coming back?”

“I fucking hope so. My attorney said until the divorce decree is finalized, it’s not a good idea to leave the state for any period of time. Taking Tommy along could be considered kidnapping, and leaving him with a babysitter could be abandonment. If Nora found out, I wouldn’t put it past her to try to fuck me over one last time.”

“Didn’t Nora already do that?” That question comes from Nathan.

“She sure did. Abandoned me, abandoned our son. But she can change her mind until the damn ink touches the paper.”

“So what are you going to do?”

A group of rowdy college-aged girls enters the bar, disrupting the quiet environment. I lean closer to hear my friends.

“Wait. Work on selling the house. Actually, I have an idea I could use your guys’ help with. Evie is adamantly against taking any money from me, but I’ll be damned if she returns to Arrow Creek to continue sleeping in her car.”

“Another stubborn-ass woman, huh? And I thought Kiersten was bad.” Nathan chuckles.

“What do you need from us?” Law asks.

“Tools and expertise. Also, your time.” My phone rings from my back pocket, disrupting the discussion of my plans. I dig it out hurriedly, but my gut turns to stone at the unfamiliar number on the screen. Not Evie calling. I answer anyway.

“Hello?”

“She doesn’t know I’m calling you.”

“Caiti?” I rise from my stool without sparing the guys a glance to find quiet outside. The warm summer air feels pleasant.

“She told me what happened. Totally broke down and confessed when she got here. I thought someone should let you know she’s safe.”

“I want you to know how incredibly sorry I am.” I approach the patio railing and lean on the weathered wood with my weight on my forearms.

“Thank you,” she whispers, her voice thick.

“I called Eric’s phone a bit ago.” I wince on his name and forge on. “Tate answered. Same idea you had calling me, but I didn’t know your number.”

“Oh. You should know you don’t have anything to worry about. He’s here because he was Eric’s best friend.”

“I know.”

“You should also know I’ve seen the way she looks at you. If you didn’t already know, her heart is in your hands.”

“I know.” I stop her from saying more. “But this isn’t about that. I appreciate you calling and letting me know she’s safe. Now go take care of each other until she’s ready to come home. I can wait.”

“I’ll get her back to you as soon as I can.”

“Don’t rush on my account,” I reassure her.

“I’m rushing on hers. I don’t want her to waste a single second.”

Her words strike me like a sledgehammer. The thought of losing Evie settles a tight feeling in my throat.

“You’re welcome to come back with her. I hope you know that we’d be happy to have you.”

“She’s coming. I have to go.” Caiti avoids addressing my invitation and instead hangs up the phone.

I save her number and tuck my cell back into my pocket. Rather than rush back inside, I clasp my hands and hang my head, welcoming the stillness of the night. The sounds of leaves rustling accompany a gentle breeze.

Alone, bathed in the yellow patio lights and the twinkling stars, I feel it.

Now I need to make sure Evie can feel it too.

“Everything all right?” Nathan steps up beside me and extends my glass. I take a welcome drink.

“Uh, yeah. As right as it can be with the woman I’m falling for somewhere across the country.”

“You know if becoming a husband and a dad didn’t turn me into such a sap, I’d be giving you so much shit right about now.”

“I’d probably take it. I never expected this, you know? After Nora. I thought I was perfectly fine hooking up when I

needed it. Forget trusting another woman again. Then Evie came out of nowhere, and I can't imagine being with anyone else."

He gazes off into the trees. "I know exactly how that feels. But with Kiersten, I wanted to fight it. Admitting to myself I loved someone other than my dead wife felt so wrong. But you..." He claps me on the shoulder and gives it a shake. "You're all in."

"I'm all in."

"Fastest a man has fallen in this town."

I shrug his hand off my shoulder and reciprocate with a shove against his. "Oh, fuck off. You knocked your wife up the first time you slept with her. Deny it all you want, but the moment you found out she was pregnant, you were all in too."

"Damn right." He drains the rest of his beer. "So what's this big idea you wanted our help with?"

"Let's go back inside. It's an all-hands-on-deck situation."

One I hope can finally convince Evie to stay by my side.

When she's ready, that is.

Evie

TODAY, I wear black.

Besides my work pants, I avoid black. It's my least favorite color. I was often told growing up how black was a slimming color. That wearing dark fabrics could hide more of my figure. But I didn't want to hide. I wanted to wear colors as loud as my personality and be seen.

Wearing black today of all days feels wrong because Eric's life should be a celebration, but I wear the dress I hastily shoved into my carry-on because grief holds me in its clutches. I don't want to be seen as bright and loud today.

I apply a stroke of my favorite earthy red lipstick to my lips and pull my curls into a messy bun at my nape. One glance at my reflection shows my undereye circles are more pronounced after nights of restless sleep. I'll cover them with big sunglasses rather than apply makeup I'll probably cry off later.

As I drop my lipstick tube back into my clutch purse, my phone lights up from the jostling. The empty notifications send a pang of sadness through me. I should call Rhett and apologize for leaving. For letting the fear and sadness rule my motivation.

Tate steps into view, his sad features reflecting mine in the mirror. We lock eyes for a second before I look away and shut

my purse. I clear my throat.

“I’m almost ready.”

“You look beautiful.”

I whirl on the ball of my foot to face him. “Don’t.” The quiet words hold a warning.

Tucking his hands into his pockets, he leans against the doorframe. “We need to talk.”

A million and one words rise to the surface. Things I should have said but didn’t. Things I regret. What stands out most is the lack of any deep emotions in regards to this man.

“We should leave well enough alone.”

“I miss you.” His voice cracks. “And I fucked up.”

“We both fucked up,” I say gently, knowing my part in our split was near fifty-fifty.

“I know.”

The easiness of his agreement causes me to snort. “I’m glad you’re willing to share the blame.”

I move to the guest bed I’ve been sleeping on and grab my shoes from my open bag. The flat strappy black sandals will be perfect for walking around today. I cross one leg over the other knee and slide my foot into one shoe.

Tate moves quickly in front of me, dropping to a knee and putting his hand on my foot.

“Let me.”

I jolt and stand, the half-attached shoe falling to the hardwood floor with a thud. “No.” I stare down at his position below me. “Do not touch me, and do not mistake my grief as weakness. Losing my brother is not an invitation for you to get me back.”

He collapses back on his ass. “I know you’re not weak. But losing Eric has opened my eyes to how short life really is, and I don’t want to waste any more of mine without you.”

I snatch my fallen shoe and move away, planting a hand in the foot of the bed for balance as I slide them on.

“It’s opened my eyes too, but I see nowhere in my future that you fit.”

“Evie...”

“I’m with someone else.”

“I know,” he states with finality.

My brows pinch together. “You know?”

“Here.” He stands and digs something out of his back pocket. At his approach, my instincts send warning flares to back up, but the bed at my back blocks any escape. A white envelope is placed in my hands, and when he curls my fingers around it, I let him. His warm hand wraps around mine and holds tight.

“Please let go of me.”

“I know about the money. I know about the debt. This is my half. You should have told me.” He dips his head to catch my attention that drifts to the envelope in my hands. The apology in his blue eyes is about six months too late. “I’m sorry for not paying attention. I’m sorry I missed what you were going through and leaving you to make hard decisions on your own.”

“How did you know?”

He gives a one-shouldered shrug. “You didn’t change your address on the credit card statements. When Eric wouldn’t give me a forwarding address, I eventually opened one to see if you needed any help.”

I pull back with the envelope clutched in my hand. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“And you should have told me.” He nods his head to my hands. “Don’t fight that. Just take it.”

My inclination is to hand it back, to fight, to do it on my own, but he’s not wrong. Life is hard enough without my



stubbornness making it harder, something I've realized recently.

I don't have to do it all by myself. Not anymore.

And Eric's heated encouragement about asking Tate to pay half comes back to me. It was the last thing we discussed before he left. The last time I saw him healthy and whole and alive. For my brother, I let this battle go.

"Thank you. For this." I hold up the envelope and tuck it in my purse. "And for the apology."

Tate looks away and wipes the corner of his eye with his thumb. "Does he make you happy?"

I inhale long and slow through my nose. My head tilts, and I give him a watery smile. "He makes me incredibly happy."

"Good. We, um, we should get going."

"I'll be just a minute."

I watch him walk away without another word.

I return to my bag to apply a light layer of sunscreen over my exposed arms and face, then plop my oversized sunglasses on top of my head. No matter how much I try to prepare myself for what's up ahead, I'll never be ready to face this day.

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FOUR HOURS LATER, Caiti and I roam arm in arm down a sandy beach, clutching our sandals between our fingers. Tate trails us, lost to his own thoughts after the long, emotional afternoon. Seagulls caw overhead, occasionally swooping down to retrieve scraps of food as kids laugh and throw more.

"Our last stop." I shield my forehead from the penetrating sunrays and gaze at the long wooden dock fifty feet ahead of us. Caiti's arm reflexively squeezes mine.

I turn to her. "Are you ready?"

The color drains from her face as panic envelops her.

“I’m not ready.” She clutches the final pink rose against her chest.

I stand solid beside her as Tate takes up her other side.

“Take your time. We can wait.”

She chokes on a hitched breath. “You’re already getting sunburned.”

A peek at my exposed arm has me agreeing with her assessment. “This red hair and pale skin can’t stand sunlight for shit, but I’ll be fine.”

“I just need a minute.” She inhales sharply at my side, indicating more than one might be necessary, but I’m fine. She can have twenty-nine if she wants. One for each year he was alive.

The minute I arrived three days ago, Caiti told me she didn’t want a memorial service. Eric wouldn’t have wanted to lie in a casket for people he hasn’t seen in years to walk by and cry over his body. She chose to have him cremated and created a plan to celebrate his life today with the people who meant most to him.

This morning, I ran out to pick up pink roses, twenty-nine single stems, one for each year of life in the color of her wedding bouquet. The three of us set off on a journey to visit every one of Eric’s favorite places—some that held cherished memories—and left a rose discreetly at each one.

We started the day with brunch at Eric’s favorite restaurant, followed by some of their favorite date spots. After a particularly heavy moment at the shop where Eric purchased Caiti’s engagement ring with the help of Tate, we swung by Eric’s favorite brewery for beer flights to soften the mood. Together, we celebrated memories of my brother, of stupid injuries and drunken nights, and toasted to a life well lived and beyond loved.

Our last stop brought us here, to the dock I’d once decorated in white ribbon and tulle, and stood by as my favorite person in the world got down on one knee and promised the rest of his life to the woman he loved.

A promise he ultimately fulfilled.

“Ready,” Caiti whispers at my side. Her watery voice shakes the foundation of my crumbling strength.

“Okay.”

I reach across my torso to clutch her bicep in my other hand. The first step is the hardest as more cracks form. My throat tightens as if caught in an unforgiving fist. Each breath feels like I’m underwater.

The weather-worn wood is warm beneath my bare feet. I follow Caiti’s lead. Each place has been a unique experience without a plan, and we’ve let her heart be our guide. The uncomfortable hot rays of the afternoon sun on my neck disappear from my mind as we reach the end. My mind flashes back to that day all those years ago when she stops in the exact place she stood. The wind whips her dress around her knees, bringing with it the scent of lake water and warm sand, and tears flow freely down her cheeks.

Caiti falls to her knees, nearly bringing me down with her as my own heart shatters. She clutches the final rose and drops her forehead onto the planks.

Tate rushes around me as I stand rooted. Echoing her sentiment, I unleash an internal scream for the unfairness. I can’t be here anymore. I thought I could do this and support her, but the pain spreads like fire in my veins.

I turn to flee, but my feet stay fixed to the spot. Rhett stands stoically at the end of the dock.

My shoes fall from dangling fingertips as I take off in a sprint. The sound of my footsteps thunder along the wood. I don’t even care to ask how or why he’s here. All that matters at this moment is that I reach him.

His long strides close his side of the distance, and he meets me halfway. I throw myself bodily into his wide chest, burrowing deep, clutching at the back of his neatly pressed blue button-up shirt as I try to climb inside.

“I’ve got you,” he says, tangling his fingers into the bun at my nape and holding my cheek tight to his chest.

“How are you here?”

“Caiti thought you might need me.” His chest beneath my ear rumbles with his response.

I dig in deeper, feeling some of the pain leak from me at his touch. “I want to come home,” I mumble the confession into his tear-dampened shirt. “I’ve missed you, and I don’t want to do this alone.”

He strokes his hand over the crown of my head. “Home is waiting when you’re ready. I can’t stay long. You’re welcome to come back with me or stay as long as you like, but I can’t handle the silence when you’re hundreds of miles away.”

“I still have things to figure out.” I tip my face into the sunrays as the full weight of my choices settles on me.

“You can have all the space you need to come to your decisions.”

“Then I want to come home with you.”

His large palms cover my jaw on either side, the thumbs stroking the hollow of my cheeks. The full force of the desire in his eyes punches a hole in my protective walls. “God, I’ve missed you.”

My lips press into the edge of my teeth as he takes them in a bruising kiss. His tongue dips into my open mouth, and I fight to force mine into his. After days apart, the anguish and pain of loss, of nights spent alone in a cold bed, I want to taste him. I want to breathe him and drink him in, knowing firsthand how fleeting life has become.

Rhett wraps one arm around the small of my back, dipping me slightly as he takes over again. A groan reverberates in his chest, vibrating beneath my palms. We’re both breathless as we part. The sound of our panting breaths washes away with the gentle waves below the dock.

Hearing the approaching footsteps urge me to turn in his arms. My back fits against his front like a piece of a puzzle. His arm crosses over my front, angled in a possessive hold. Caiti and Tate approach, and at her blotchy expression, I pull free to take her into my arms.

“I’m so sorry I walked away. I couldn’t—” I choke against threatening tears and rub her back to distract myself. “The memories...” I try and fail again.

Her arms wrap around me unexpectedly tight. “Go be with your man.”

I hold her back. “You asked him to come.”

“I wish Eric could be here to hold me through this. There’s no reason for you to suffer alone.”

Her words burrow their way into my heart for safekeeping. *Alone* lost its appeal the day I met Rhett in a small-town parking lot.

“I wish I could pack you and take you with me. Please come stay with us.”

She looks out at the watery horizon, and I follow her gaze there.

“When I’m ready, I’ll be on my way.”

I drop my head to her shoulder, watching the clouds float above calm blue waters as I bid my brother a silent goodbye. “Take your time.”

Evie

HOT RAYS of the sun send a glare through my windshield. Lowering the sunglasses over my tired eyes, I punch the call button on my dash and bring up Rhett's contact. After two flights and a layover, I'm finally about fifteen minutes from Arrow Creek with my eye set on a hot shower and a warm bed, preferably with Rhett in one or both.

"Hey," he answers. The sound of his engine roaring to life can be heard in the background.

"I'm nearing town. Can I come to your place for a shower and a nap?"

"Actually, I'm picking you up. Meet me at the truck stop."

I don't stifle a thick yawn. "I don't know. I'm so tired from two flights and a layover."

Rhett tried to push his ticket to a later flight, but he needed to get back, not wanting to spend more time out of the state than necessary in case Nora decided to drop by. Only twenty-four hours have passed since he left, but I'm more than ready to see him again.

"Do you trust me, Rosie?" The husky notes I love infiltrate his tone and settle deep inside me.

"What are you up to?" A suspicious flutter rouses nerves in my gut.

“Do you trust me?”

“I do,” I answer softly.

“Then I’ll meet you at the truck stop.”

Nervous energy sparks to life. A grin resides in my voice when I give in. “Okay. But if I fall asleep in your passenger seat, the person to blame is you.”

“Do I need to stay on the line to keep you awake?”

“I’m okay, Rhett. I’ll see you soon.”

“Drive safe.”

I sever the call on my end. My fingers flex on the wheel in anticipation of what’s to come. We left things in a strange place. Both when I left without him and yesterday when he flew home without me. Where we stand remains a bit of a mystery. One I’m more than ready to uncover.

Pulling into the lot slaps me with a heavy dose of déjà vu. The familiar Jeep is parked in the same spot it was the day we met. Rhett leans against the door with a coffee in each hand.

Like that day not so long ago, I park and pop out of my car. Not trying to appear too eager, I brush out fake wrinkles in my outfit while critically eyeing my appearance. A mid-thigh, clingy blue sundress swishes around my legs with each step that closes the distance between us. I run my hands over the soft fabric. A tie in the back accentuates my hourglass waist, and a large V dips between my breasts to reveal ample cleavage. Complicated straps crisscross over my feet to hold the white sandals secure. My eyes are covered by oversized black sunglasses, but the smile stretching my lips divulges some of my thoughts.

“You are a goddess,” Rhett says.

I revel in the compliment as a blush tints my cheeks. Rhett closes the gap, brushing his lips against one once I’m close enough.

“This is for you.”

I take the offered coffee, perking up at the mere idea of the first caffeinated sip.

“You have no idea how much I need this, thank you.” I close my eyes and hum along with the rich bitterness on my taste buds.

“Just glad you’re home, Rosie.”

“I’m glad to be home,” I answer in earnest.

Rhett stares at me as if I’m a decadent treat. His heated gaze trails down my body before returning to my face.

“I have something I want to show you.” He moves away and opens the passenger door, setting his cup inside. I immediately occupy the space he vacated and place my cup in the holder next to his. Rhett’s fingertips forge a trail along the exposed skin of my shoulder.

“Get in.”

“Is everything okay?” A twinge of worry resides in my tone. Maybe something happened while I was gone. He brushes my hair off my shoulder as if attempting to sweep my apprehension aside.

“Now that you’re here, I’ve never been better.”

Though they are hidden behind shades, my brow crinkles. I should believe his words, but something feels off.

“Are you sure everything is okay? Tommy’s good?”

God, the thought of something else... Rhett moves farther into my space and gently caresses my cheek.

“We’re good, Rosie. Not a single thing needs your worry.”

As if he can’t wait any longer, he brings our mouths together, fitting my bottom lip firmly between both of his. His warm hand slides from my cheek to cradle the back of my neck, deepening the kiss in order to touch his tongue to mine. I’m sure I taste like coffee and cinnamon gum, but Rhett doesn’t seem to mind. He drinks me in as if it’s the most heady combination.



My legs part as my butt touches the seat, and I prop one foot on the floorboard. He doesn't miss the invitation and advances. Fitting himself between my spread thighs, he follows me down until my back rests against the center console. My heart bangs against my rib cage at the intrusion of filthy thoughts. All the dirty things I want to do with him bombard me at once.

Any reason is lost to hitched breaths and quiet pants as he slips an eager finger beneath my dress. He moves my panties away from my damp center and drives a digit inside, finding me drenched and primed.

"Fucking love sundress season. I want you to wear one every day." He buries his face into the V at my neckline, paying attention with open-mouthed kisses to my sensitive breasts as he works another finger inside. The thick invasion forces my back to arch and a cry to fall from my lips. I eagerly grab the waist of his jeans, and within seconds, I've worked the button free and lowered the zipper.

"Rosie," he growls the name that fills me with an unnamed feeling. The coiling tension of where this is headed expands between us. We don't need words at this point. Our consent is clear in our actions.

In the next instant, I have him freed, hot and hard and heavy in my hand as I jerk him off in a tight fist.

"I don't want your hand." I try to tug him closer to the place I need him most. Filling me up and dragging me with him over the edge. It's only been a week, but now that I've had him, it's a week too long.

He grunts and pulls a condom out of the glove compartment in obvious approval. The box appears to be the same one from our night at the hotel, judging by the number of rubbers remaining on the roll.

"We better make it quick then before someone sees."

"Yes," I moan and shift my hips for better accessibility. "Hurry."

"Hang on to me."

I release his hard erection to clutch his shoulders as he rolls on the condom. His fingers brush my opening before he guides himself to my hot center.

We groan together at the intrusion. He fills me with a steady, deep thrust. The gravel scrapes beneath his shoes as he adjusts his position to power into me while keeping his back below the view of the windshield.

Indecent sounding slaps and moans float into the air as we race toward an exciting finish. Thoughts of bystanders drift away like a mote caught in a summer breeze. I couldn't care less at this moment with the man who's broken down my walls. I want him to take it all from me. Every single thing I have left to give and then some.

My limbs twitch as the first warning sign of an impending orgasm. Rhett moves his face out of my cleavage to take my lips in a searing kiss as he bucks his hips and presses a calloused finger against my clit.

“Get there, Rosie. Before we're arrested,” he grunts and shudders as his cock grows impossibly harder.

The added pressure of his finger sends shocks sparking to life. I roll my hips in time to his thrusts and yank his lips back to mine, using his mouth as a muzzle as the first wailing cry rips out of me.

“God, fuck, yes, baby,” he groans, punctuating his jetting orgasm with slow deep thrusts.

The rhythmic pulsing of his dick sends mini orgasmic shocks through me, so sensitive that I have to stop rocking my hips.

The release of pressure from my clit causes me to yelp at the sensation. Along with the feel of him slipping free and leaving me empty.

“Before I sit up, is anybody looking?” I giggle at the absurdity. I paid no mind to getting fucked in a car in a public parking lot. The only reason I'd care now is because I still need to sleep here until I find my own place.

Rhett tucks himself back into his jeans and straightens.

“Not a soul.” He offers his hand.

“Sorry for the detour. I hope we’re not late for whatever it is you have planned.”

“If you ever apologize for taking my cock again, I’ll put you over my knee,” he growls, his face inches from my own. With a shuck under the chin, he gives me one last lingering kiss. “Anywhere, anytime, anyway you want it.”

I pull a face. “Now you sound like a fast food commercial.”

Rhett cups his crotch. “One-hundred-percent all-American meat.” He slams my door for me.

Rhett sets us on the road to some secret place while unanswered questions flit through my head. The lull of the motor and smooth ride encourages me to sleep. I fight to keep my eyelids open. Not ten minutes later, the image outside my window begins to look familiar.

“Are we going to your house?”

“My attorney’s submitted the divorce papers. It shouldn’t be more than a couple of weeks until a judge signs off on it.”

“Why are we talking about this?” An unpleasant sensation creeps into my stomach. Rhett glances at me before returning his attention to the road.

“I know you have things you want to figure out in your life, and I’m letting you know that I have mine. But I feel this strongly, Evie. I feel it in my gut that it’s for real this time.”

I grab my coffee, if only for something to do with my hands. The warm exterior returns blood to my cold palms. “You’re saying really cryptic things right now.”

“I know.” He smirks with a charming twist of his lips. “I’m trying to prepare you because I have my work cut out for me.”

I roll my eyes as anticipation fills me. “I’m still not understanding.”

The familiar tree-lined driveway comes into view. A hot shower calls my name from somewhere beyond the leafy

boughs.

“You will.”

After yet another mysterious sentence, Rhett drives past the paved entrance and continues down the road.

“Um, where are we going?” Shades of green blur in the side mirror as the house disappears from view.

“Right...here.” The click of the blinker kicks on. Rhett executes a right-hand turn. Fresh torn earth provides a bumpy path cut through the trees, leading to a clearing up ahead.

My heart kicks up a notch with adrenaline. Sheer willpower forces my mouth to remain shut as a million more questions swirl in my head. A welcome sip of coffee busies my active tongue while a swarm of bees buzz around my stomach.

We slow to a crawl on the dirt road. Two rectangular structures, surrounded by the lush greenery, grow in size as we near.

“What is this?” I ask, my voice a brittle whisper. Without waiting for Rhett’s response, I unbuckle and jump out.

Synapses fire again and begin to make sense of the buildings as I walk over packed down earth. A white window surrounded by gray siding looks out over the driveway, and a small porch juts out the side, the golden lumber fresh and ready to be stained. An identical building rests on a shared concrete foundation not even a hundred feet away.

“Come on.” Rhett curls his fingers around my hand and tugs me to the porch of the first house. The white door matches the windows. He throws the door open, allowing me to precede him inside.

The interior is wide open. A single wooden staircase leads to a small loft with a railing. Exposed beams make up the ceiling frame, and planks line the walls in a shiplap design. Along the wall shared by the porch are a row of cabinets and a small kitchenette. A single couch rests in the space diagonal from the kitchen with a modest flat screen mounted across from it.

And beside the couch rests a brand-new navy-blue dog bed.

“Rhett.” I choke out his name. My throat tightens as I peruse the space with wide eyes.

“Don’t fight this. Because I swear to God I won’t make it knowing you’re sleeping in your car out of sheer stubbornness. You won’t let me put you up in a hotel, so this is the next best thing.”

“Did you build this?” The disbelief in my tone brings him to close the gap between us.

“It helps to have a buddy with a construction crew and a slow season, but yeah.” He confirms as if the project is no big deal.

“What—um—” I’m lost for words while at the same time filled with the sensation of finding where I belong. “Who lives over there?”

He gives a bashful shrug and brushes the side of his nose with his thumb. “That one’s for Tommy and me.”

Oh my God. *This man.* The thunder of my pulse reaches an alarming rate.

Shaking in my arms brings my attention back to his face. The soft set of his warm eyes drags me in like a rip current, except I don’t want to be freed. My heart implores reason to let me drown.

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable anymore by asking you to move into the house I shared with my ex-wife. You’ll live here, and I’ll live next door until you’re ready to live somewhere new with me, but I’m warning you now, that’s all the space I can give.”

“You’re so sure about this you built me a house.”

His face gets closer. “I’m so sure about this that I’d move into any house tomorrow if it meant I get to have you. If we can’t be roommates, then we can be neighbors.”

I choke on a laugh.

“And I’ll probably barge over at seven in the morning before Tommy wakes up, so be ready for me, Rosie.”

Old arguments rise to the forefront. “This isn’t much different, you know. It still feels like a handout.”

“If you wait until you’re ready and we’re on equal footing, you’ll be waiting forever. You did the hard part.” He tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. “You showed everyone you could do it on your own. *You* did that. Now it’s time to take it easy, beautiful.”

I break away from his gaze as my heart beats wildly in my chest. With an easy tap of his finger, he tilts my face back.

“I’m in love with you.”

I suck in a sharp breath at his admission as the remaining walls around my heart crumble to dust.

“I fell in love with you over shared meals and starry nights. From the day I met you, you made me feel things I didn’t know were possible. You showed me what a partnership truly should be. And since I’ve come to that realization, it’ll be damn hard to ever let you go. So tell me now if this isn’t what you want. If I’m not it for you. If you don’t love me back. Tell me and you can keep the house, and I’ll go—”

I silence him with a kiss. When we pull back, I grip his face in my palms.

“I love you too.”

His eyes search mine as he swallows hard. “You want this? You want...me?”

I nod, blinking back tears. “I do.” I press my lips hard against his. “I do want you.”

“Are we more than more yet, Rosie?” he mumbles against my lips. The weight of my struggles vanishes with his words.

“I think we are more than more.”

## EPILOGUE

2 MONTHS LATER...

Evie

I TURN my gaze out the window to the little deck as the phone rings in my ear. The fingers of my free hand clench in order to quell the nerves. My stomach twists in anticipation. Rhett should be home at any moment, and I don't know how he'll react to my impulsive move.

Before I can consider the thought further, the line connects.

"If you're calling about our contract, it's void. You can speak to my lawyer, but I paid you for the work performed."

"I'm not calling about the contract," I answer softly. She really thinks I'm calling about a month-to-month contract for cleaning services? This woman is incredibly dense.

"Then I have nothing to say to you," she sneers.

"Nora, please listen." I inject my tone with a plea I feel down to my soul.

A beat of silence pulses over the line. I take her lack of retort as a positive sign.

"I'm calling about Tommy." I forge on.

"This isn't any of your business." Her voice cracks like a whip, but I still hear the concern. She's covering her fear with a bitchy bravado that I see straight through.

“The decree is finished. But we both know if you came back, Rhett would work something out.” He’s said as much over the month since the divorce was finalized. Though, he’s still too hurt to bridge the divide. “Tommy needs you.”

“It sounds to me like he has you.” Her tone loses heat by the minute.

“You’re so lucky,” I breathe and blink back the sting of tears. “You carried him inside you. You felt his kicks. You received that precious gift, and you’ve turned your back on him without a single blink.”

“You don’t have the right—”

I cut her off.

“Oh, but I do. I do because his dad might not find it inside to reach out to you again. You’ve hurt Rhett with your games, but going so far to hurt his son is unforgivable. I’m begging you, Nora, to reconsider your stance and come see your son. Before it’s too late.”

She scoffs. “Rhett would never keep me away from Tommy.”

I shrug, though she can’t see it. “He might not. But someday, that little boy is going to grow into a child, and a teenager, and a young man. And no matter how hard his dad tries to protect him from what you’re doing, Tommy’s eventually going to feel that hurt. We can love him to soften the blow. And I can only hope he doesn’t feel the full force of your abandonment.”

I turn my attention to the door swinging open. Rhett steps just inside the threshold, his face a mixture of concern and confusion as he sees me. I wonder if he heard part of what I said through the door.

“Why are you telling me this?” she asks, capturing my attention again. My eyes remain locked on Rhett’s as I answer.

“Because I’m not one of the lucky ones. Not yet anyway. And as much as it hurts that I may never have a baby of my own, I’m falling in love with your little boy day by day.”



Rhett's brown eyes heat, and his nostrils flare.

"Sounds to me like you don't need me at all." The conviction in Nora's earlier tone has burned itself out.

"I'm not his mother." I swallow hard to force down the lump in my throat. "I won't ever be his mother. But I can tuck him in and make him pancakes and patch skinned elbows and knees if you refuse to step up and be here."

While Nora remains silent, Rhett closes the distance between us and crouches in front of me. His warm palms settle on each of my thighs, and his face is filled with such open love and desire that I want to chuck this phone across the room and climb into his lap.

"I don't know what to say." Nora breaks into the moment.

The phone is suddenly jostled from my hand, and Rhett puts it to his ear. My open mouth snaps closed as he speaks.

"You don't have to say anything right now. Just know I can sleep at night knowing we did everything to have you in Tommy's life. Either you put in the effort to be there or not. The choice is yours."

With that, he disconnects the call.

"Rhett! We were having a decent moment."

His lips settle over mine in a demanding kiss.

"Moment's over."

---

2 MONTHS AFTER THAT...

Evie

THE ENVELOPE in my hand crinkles. The swirling scrawl of my sister-in-law's writing sends a concerned ache through my chest. She recently moved back to the States, and one of the first things she does is send me a letter. If I could roll my eyes

at her, I would. What I'd give to see her right now and give her a hug.

I move my gaze from the mysterious note to take in the dawn rising over the cliffs. The warm sky is a mixture of periwinkle and tangerine as cotton clouds float overhead. This isn't the first time I've come back since I received the news that altered my life, but this is the first time I've come back alone.

Standing from a rock, I brush my hands over my backside to remove debris and walk closer to the edge. Just like the first day I stood here, the significance of my place in this world is thrust into perspective. The minuscule problems of daily life bleed away.

I take a lingering inhale of the sweet-smelling pink rose before I crouch and place it on the edge of the cliff.

"I miss you, brother."

As I straighten, the wind tosses my hair against my face like a warm finger brushing my cheek.

I slip a finger beneath the fold of the envelope and tear it open. The paper rustles in the breeze as it unfolds. The short handwritten paragraph draws a crinkle from my forehead.

*EVIE,*

*Eric wanted you to have this. We talked about it the day we left Arrow Creek. He was saving this money from your parents' estate for your wedding. When things fell through with Tate, he thought he'd continue to hold on to it. Of course, that was before he learned of your living situation.*

*He planned to send this as soon as we returned to Germany, but that day never came.*

*He told me he wanted you to have it for housing, and even infertility treatments if that's what you choose to do. I don't need to know what you do with it as it belongs to you. Please know I'm taken care of. This money has always been yours.*

*I'll see you soon.*

*Love you,*

*Caiti*

A HOT TEAR trickles down my cheek. I brush it away with the back of my hand and fortify myself with a steely breath. I don't bother checking the amount on the check. Instead, I dig my cell from my pocket, not sure if I'll receive much reception up here, but I have to try. I scroll to Caiti's name.

The phone rings continuously, as it has for much of the last two months.

"Hey, this is Caiti Harris. Leave a message."

I hang up without leaving a message. She'll come to me when she's ready.

---

2 MONTHS AFTER THAT...

Evie

RHETT and I lie in the loft in my house, tangled in the sheets with a baby monitor on the bedside table. Minutes ago, little babbles and random words filled the peaceful silence as Tommy woke in the house next door. My head rests against Rhett's broad chest while he twists a curl of my hair around his finger.

"What time does Caiti land today?"

I prop my elbow on his chest. "I'll pick her up from the airport at six, and we'll drive straight to Calypso's for dinner and drinks."

He releases the unruly curl and strokes his hand down the length of my hair. "How's she been doing?"

I drop my chin to his chest and flick my gaze in the opposite direction. "I don't think she's doing great, actually."

She's been back in the States for two months, and it's taken her this long to visit. I feel like she's hiding something."

"She's still grieving. I'm sure the adjustment isn't easy."

"I know." I press an open-mouthed kiss to his pecs. "I'm just glad she's finally making her way out East. A night out and a raging hangover might be of some assistance."

Rhett laughs. "You two are going to regret it. Nothing good comes from getting that drunk once you hit thirty."

"Lucky for me, I have a few years to go."

I begin a downward descent and plaster kisses along his naked torso on my way. My intentions are clear. Rhett settles back with his hands behind his head and a blissful expression on his face.

"Where're you going, Rosie?"

I reach the sexy groove at his hip with a smile on my face and run my tongue along the ridge.

Before I can answer, the volume of the baby monitor increases. "Daddah."

"This kid is giving me blue balls." Rhett releases a pained groan.

His abdomen receives one more kiss before I roll off him to get dressed. "You'll have to sneak over earlier tomorrow." I find myself pinned to the mattress with a hand gripping my throat.

"Or you could move in with me."

This is the first time in six months that Rhett has made the proposition, staying true to his word to give me space. Honestly, I'm surprised he hasn't asked sooner.

"Okay," I reply easily, more than ready to move on to the next chapter of our lives.

Shock drops his mouth open for half a second. "That's it? No arguments or discussions?"

“I’ve been waking up to you in my bed every morning for the past five and a half months. We’re practically living together as it is.”

“Fuck, woman. I thought I’d have to fight harder to see the day.”

So did I.

But Rhett was right about getting me out of my car. Coming home to an actual house with a shower after work each day boosted my overall morale. The money from Tate helped pay down half my debt, and with a roof over my head, it didn’t take long to cover the rest. All I needed was to stop being so stubborn and accept a tiny bit of help for everything else to fall into place.

“I’m a bit surprised myself,” I tease. He dives in for a deep kiss that quickly turns my insides to liquid.

“Dad, I’m hungry.” Tommy’s request halts our sexy endeavor.

Rhett runs his nose along the length of my cheek. “Later, after your night out, I’m going to have my way with this sexy body.”

“You mean once I’m easy and drunk?”

“We haven’t explored that option yet.”

Rhett being a single dad to Tommy means we haven’t had a lot of time to go out together. Nora still hasn’t returned, not even a peep to check in on Tommy. Seems she really was only using him as a way to hurt Rhett.

“I’m looking forward to it. Might be our only chance for a while, depending on how long Caiti stays.”

“All the more reason to find us a new place sooner than later.” Rhett climbs off to get dressed, and I follow suit.

“I think...I mean, if you’re okay with it...*I’m* okay with it.” I wring my hands together.

His brows crease as I struggle to find the words. His hands circle around my back to pull me close. “What is it?”

“We can move back to the house.”

“Are you sure?” He brushes my hair from my forehead.

“More than sure. Enough time has passed, and it’s just a house, right? We can make it our own.”

“If that’s what you want, then I’m all in.”

“Except the bed.”

“We’ll set fire to the bed,” he confirms.

I rise on my tiptoes to kiss his lips and bring my mouth to his ear. “I’ve had several fantasies involving you and the bench seat in the master bath. Even before I knew the house was yours,” I whisper.

“Rosie. Get your ass back in this bed.”

“Can’t!” I squeal and push out of his arms. My thundering footsteps pound down the stairs, Rhett hot on my heels. “Tommy needs breakfast!”

I shriek as he catches me, dipping me low for another searing kiss.

“God, I love you,” he mutters against my mouth. I pull back just far enough to witness the look of love in his eyes, one I’ve never seen directed at me before in my life.

“I love you too, Rhett Senova.”

---

LATER THAT SAME NIGHT...

Evie

THE MINUTE I picked up Caiti from the airport, I knew something was wrong. Grief stole a chunk of her vibrancy, but she hid the depth of her pain through months of phone calls and texts. Sitting in a rowdy bar environment and pounding shots like water is a woman I’ve never met before. Drowning in her grief. Masking the depth of her pain.

“We should probably head home,” I shout to be heard above the chatter as the inkling of a headache splits my skull.

Rhett stands at my side, nursing a drink while talking to the bartender. He arrived forty minutes ago to drive us home, but Caiti refuses to budge. I don’t miss the way a quiet Dane steals concerned glances at my sister.

She grimaces with her latest shot. “You can leave if you’d like. I’m going to stay.”

“My head hurts,” I try to guilt her.

“Take a pill,” she mutters.

“Caiti. Something isn’t right.”

“Nothing is right,” she snaps back and flicks her empty shot glass across the bar top. “Give me another!”

I glance helplessly at the two observant men. Dane grabs the bottle of vodka and fills her glass.

“Last one for a while, miss. I’ll get you a water.”

“You can’t do that!” Caiti argues on the edge of belligerence.

Dane sets an icy highball glass filled to the brim in front of her before leaning his elbows against the bar. “I can because I’m the owner.”

“Killjoy,” she mutters beneath her breath, provoking a rare smirk from him.

Rhett latches onto my elbow and gestures for me to come with him.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell Caiti.

“I’ll be right here.” She raises her shot in a salute and downs the glass.

He leads me a quarter way down the bar, weaving through patrons as we go. He fits us between a couple of stools and rubs warmth into my upper arms.

“Are you okay?”

“It’s a headache. I’m fine.” I worry my bottom lip with my teeth and squeeze my forehead. “I should have checked on her more. I should have made her come visit sooner.”

“You’ve done everything you can. You and I both know it’s impossible to force a stubborn woman to do something she doesn’t want to do.” His gaze is pointed.

“Yeah, well, now she doesn’t want to leave, but I can’t leave her here alone.”

“I can keep an eye on her.”

I look at the quiet bartender who’s injected himself into our conversation. He’s braced himself with both hands flat against the gleaming counter.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t know you very well, and she’s my sister.”

“I’ve seen grief like that. Sometimes it’s better to let it wring itself out, and I have enough on staff tonight to join her while she does that.” He yanks the white towel off his shoulder and buffs the handprints from the bar.

“He’s good people,” Rhett says quietly to me. “I trust him, but I understand if you don’t.”

“It’s just an offer so the two of you can get out of here. I can comp her tab and drive her home when the bar closes in...” He checks his black wristwatch. “An hour and a half.”

If Rhett trusts him, I know I can too. It’s just my heart aches at seeing her torn up like this.

“You’ll get her home safe? No funny business?” I seek confirmation.

He grunts humorlessly. “You have my word.”

I look at Rhett and sigh. “As long as she’s okay with it, I guess it’s not a bad solution for everyone.”

Rhett releases me to unhook a key from his keyring. “This is for the house she’s in. One on the right once you pull into the driveway.”

“Got it.”



When we return, Caiti regards her water with a sullen expression. “This sucks,” she mutters.

“Come on, honey. Let’s get home and sleep it off. Tomorrow, we can take a walk by the river, and I can show you the Swinging Bridge.”

“I said I don’t want to go. Not yet.” She chugs half her glass of water while I’m stunned into silence. The Caiti I know never talked to anyone like this. Sure, she could be heated in arguments, but she typically manifested her emotions in the form of tears, not aggression.

Knowing she has someone to keep her safe, I deadbolt my own emotions tight with an internal promise to force her into a serious talk tomorrow. She needs help. Not the kind of cloak the alcohol provides.

“If you want to stay, then Dane’s promised to get you home safe. He’s a good friend of Rhett’s.” I gesture to the tall bartender as I ask the quiet words. “Do you want to stay?”

She appraises him with a critical eye. When she returns her gaze to mine, the pain is diminished. Hidden, but not gone. God, it would torment Eric to see her this way. “Yes. I want to stay.”

“I love you.” I bid her goodbye, wrapping my arms around her shoulders in a tight hug. “We’ll talk in the morning.”

“I love you too.”

Rhett wraps my hand securely in his and tows me to the door. Before stepping into the biting fall night air, I glance back. Dane occupies the stool I vacated. With a full beer in front of him, and his eyes pinned on Caiti as she talks animatedly, he appears to soak up each word.

Tonight, I’ll sleep off this headache.

Then tomorrow, I’ll work on getting my Caiti back.

---

AROUND SEVEN THE FOLLOWING MORNING...

Evie

A HEAVY CHORUS of booms sounds against the door, rousing me from a dead sleep. Bleary-eyed and dazed, I check the time on my phone.

“Ugh. Who is that?”

Rhett rolls onto his side and up, sliding into the wrinkled jeans I tore off him last night.

“I’ll check.”

Knowing I’m visible from the front door, I drag on my robe from the end of the bed, belting it closed as the door swings open.

Dane stands much like Rhett, shirtless and in a pair of jeans.

“Is she here?” He peers around Rhett.

“What did you do?” I screech as I fly down the stairs, my heart pounding in time to my footsteps.

He scrubs a palm down his tired face.

“I fucked up.”

###

If you want to find out what happens with **Caiti and Dane**, preorder **Where Our Turn Begins!**

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That’s a wrap on Rhett & Evie! I hope you enjoyed reading their story! These two stole my heart from the very first meeting. If you loved their journey too, please consider sharing with a friend or leaving a review.

## WHAT TO READ NEXT

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## Chapter One

Kiersten

Hand me a fun-size bag of M&M's and there wouldn't be enough candies to count the number of one-night stands I've had in my life. Hell, make it two bags, and I'll gladly eat the leftovers.

I won't ever apologize for the woman I am. Thirty-seven isn't one foot in the grave, and nearing forty while single isn't a death sentence.

However, at this exact moment, I regret some of my rambunctious actions of the past twenty-four hours. I feel the need to seek penance from Our Holy Creator in exchange for a little reprieve from the throbbing in my head and the ache in my joints.

There's plenty of truth in saying we get less limber as we age, and I knew a backbend while I rode cowgirl was a stupid idea, but the vodka screamed *yes!* and my vagina backed that bitch up with a *hell, yeah!*

I bent and warped and cracked.

Nearly crippled myself all in the name of rough, wild sex.

Reality smacks me in the face this morning. I'm no longer a twenty-year-old spring chicken, proven by the pain rocketing through my back, and dammit, does that make me sound like an arthritic grandmother.

Groaning quietly from a pillowy cocoon of black sheets I don't recognize, I wait for the hazy film obscuring my vision to recede. Squinting against the harsh sunlight—*who doesn't own freaking bedroom curtains?*—I scan my surroundings, stop, and do a double take on the set of fantastic toned buns peeking from beneath the top sheet. And I'm not talking about bread.

Who would have thought Nathan hid all *that* beneath his white button-down and navy medic pants? Certainly, not I. I've only witnessed brief glimpses of taut skin over abs and rounded biceps from time to time.

The aroma of him, woody and smoke, permeates the air around me from the sheets snug beneath my chin. He smells like fantasies and tequila-fueled bad decisions.

My fingertips curl around my neck as I prop myself up on my elbow. I ogle the man who screwed my brains out last night. His lats ripple along his back as he releases a stretch and turns his head toward me with a lazy grin on his face.

"Mornin', stranger," I grunt. My voice belongs to a sixty-year-old chain smoker, not a sexy thirty-something. Now that it's out in the open, I roll with it.

Nathan's expression morphs into a puckered mouth and downturned brows as he regards me.

Ah, to hell with this awkward morning after.

"What's the matter, Nate? Don't I look as pretty this morning as I did last night?" The sheet slips from my fingertips to expose half of my chest. Whoops.

His gaze immediately follows the movement and locks onto the puckered nipple he had his mouth all over last night. A full-body shiver envelops me from all this unhindered attention, and the puckered little traitor tightens even more under his stare.

"You're beautiful," he declares, clearing his throat and removing my nipple from his eye line by rolling to his back. His actions reveal he finds the ceiling prettier.

I hum noncommittally and extricate the rest of my nakedness from his gazillion sheets. Crawling lithely but, in reality, looking more like Gollum than a sexy tigress, I hover my bare torso over his with an intentional brush of my nipples against his chest. The light dusting of hair across his pecs deliciously grazes my skin.

“It was fun, lover boy, but I have things to do today. Thanks for last night.” Bending down, I plant a hasty smack on his plump lips.

Nathan jackknives, supporting his weight on an elbow. Before I can slink away, he snakes his other hand behind my neck and deepens my quick smooch goodbye. His tongue dips into my mouth slow with long strokes, much the same way it explored other places last night. He doesn't release me until we're both panting.

“What's the rush?” he murmurs, gaze flitting back down to my lips. Good lord, for a guy labeled as a “nice guy,” he sure knows what he's doing. The need to fan the flush on my cheeks intensifies with his heated stare. I scramble from his body and stand on trembling legs beside his bed. My hangover kills in this position and begs me to return to horizontal stat.

“Uh...” My mind blanks of the many, *many* excuses I normally have stockpiled for situations such as this and locks onto the most logical one. “Because it's called a one-night stand for a reason.” A sexy smile at the end softens the rejection even though I'm sure my lips resemble a dried pepper. “And I need food,” I tack on lamely.

“Kiersten.” My name stated firmly sends my stomach into a tizzy unrelated to the copious number of shots still sloshing around. “Get back in bed.”

God, shit. God.

When he says it all hot and commanding, ugh, everything below my belly button tightens as if being squeezed in a fist. I'm certain I make a face, and I'm definitely breathing deep. Contemplating his request is laughable. When have I really ever said no to sex with a hot, naked dude who isn't a creep?

I don't exactly have anything I need to do today. The fib slipped out readily to save us both from the awkward song and dance. We share a best friend, and we kind of work together. Those two reasons should be enough to step back and think twice about our next moves.

But if he's willing to push all that aside for another round (or two) of mind-blowing fornication, then who am I to become a modest Puritan and say no?

"If you keep standing there naked, I'm coming over to you." Nathan whips the covers from his waist and sits on the edge of the bed, revealing he also hasn't regained one iota of modesty. This could be detrimental for our working relationship because I have a feeling it'll be impossible not to picture him naked going forward.

However, that worry can wait. Patience running thin, he stands and stalks me like his prey.

Challenge accepted.

Cocking my right hip, I cup one hand over my slender waist and invite him closer by crooking my finger with the other one.

The skin around his eyes tightens, and his nostrils flare as he mutters, "Fuck."

His powerful lunge closes the space between us, but I'm ready for him. As he grabs my waist, I lower my center of gravity, swipe my leg around one of his, and take him out at the ankle. A shriek erupts from my lips as elation takes over. He falls to his other side on the carpet, dragging me down with him, and I scramble to straddle his waist to maintain the upper hand.

Grinning down at him, I cup my unclothed crotch hovering over his hips. "If you want it, you have to get it."

We're a tangle of limbs, tickling fingers, and grabbing hands. The playful nature of my game rapidly declines into one of arousal and touching and tastes. Giggles yield to moans of pleasure as Nathan tries to maneuver and buck me into a

different position. His wandering fingers are abrasive across my nipples, and his palms are unyielding on my hips.

He bucks beneath me, the thickness of his dick rubs through my arousal enough to awaken the nerves but not enough to enter me. I shiver and shake with his motions, holding onto my grit. I refuse to give in so easily. This little game of foreplay started with me, and I'm determined to finish it. Whichever way that happens, we'll both come out on top.

My resolve holds until his nimble fingers dig into my hipbone and send me into a raucous fit of giggles. I can't maintain my position through the uproarious laughter, and Nathan uses his moment of distraction to simultaneously buck and lift, sending me flying into the air.

Squeals in anticipation of the impact pierce the otherwise quiet morning. Yanking me against his solid chest, he cradles me against his pecs, folds my flailing arms in, and rolls me to my back, all before I have even a second to react. His torso slides down mine, big hands pin my elbows to my sides, and his mouth attacks the apex of my thighs.

Game. Over.

With each swipe of his tongue, I surrender. I don't even fight back. My energy's spent from the hangover and pretending to struggle. I turn limp. My knees fall open as though I'm in the stirrups on my gynecologist's exam table, and unintelligible sounds fall from my lips.

"Please don't stop," I whine, gripping my own breast and tugging at my nipple.

His growl vibrates against my core as he witnesses the action, spurring him to plunge his tongue inside me double the tempo from seconds before.

Thrusting my hips harder against his face, I whimper and arch my back. His tongue disappears, leaving me insistent and triggering a needy cry to fall from my lips.

"Give it to me, Kiersten," Nathan croons, replacing his tongue with two thick fingers as his mouth suctions my clit.



After only one night together, this man *knows*. He plays my body like a prized instrument, and within seconds, my orgasm rolls through me. Before my chest finishes heaving, he centers himself above my body and adroitly guides himself inside.

We groan together at the intrusion. Aftershocks lick my core as he stretches his way in, and I arch my neck against the hard floor. His forehead collides with the center of my sweaty chest as he thrusts deep. Our rhythm turns impatient. I don't know if we both realize this will be the last time, but we fuck like it is.

"You feel incredible," he grunts, clutching my right thigh and drawing it higher around him. Dragging my ass into his lap, he seats himself deep and sits back on his heels.

"Touch me," I order, gasping when he immediately complies, his thumb going right to the spot I need him most if I have any hope of getting there a second time.

"Yes!" I prop myself on an elbow and trail my fingers up his shoulder. The hair is damp at his neck, and I grip the sweaty strands while swiveling my hips.

"Get there," he orders tersely.

"Yes, sir," I moan. The words leave my lips as everything tightens and steals the sarcasm from my tone as I come.

"God, yes." He wildly ruts his own release and throbs deep inside me. Seconds pass where he lies motionless with his face tucked into my chest. The heaving of his back is the sole indication of life.

Should I ask him to move, or continue to bask in his warm weight and dewy-kissed skin touching mine?

Before a verdict becomes clear, he abruptly pulls back, hooks me around the back of the head, and takes me with him until I'm vertical in his lap. My choppy golden hair flies wildly behind me, and I clutch his shoulders for balance. His lips meld to mine in another searing kiss. He pulls back to deliver a sharp nip to the bottom lip before he dives back into my mouth.

Nathan wrenches away and rests his forehead against mine. “You should take your pill.”

Tension solidifies my shoulders as my heart deflates. I jerk my head back. “Uh... real sexy, Nate. I’ll get right on that.”

Inches away rests my discarded tee from the night before, and I snag it, tugging it over my head before dislodging his semi-chub from inside me. Even at half mast, he has an impressive tool in his belt.

He snags my bicep in his huge palm.

“Hey.”

The immature part of me forgets I’m thirty-seven and demands an eye roll and foot stomp, but the grown-up in me wins. I look down at his sex-mussed hair with a severe expression I hope says *you better grovel, buddy* rather than *I have to poop*.

“That sounded wrong. I’m sorry. Last night, you said you were on the pill so we didn’t use, you know, a condom.” A pinkish flush spreads along his neck. He releases me and scrubs his hand over the back of his neck, making his appealing bicep bunch. “The effectiveness relies on taking it at the same time each day. Look...” He blows out a flustered breath, continuing to shove his foot farther into his big mouth while still looking completely adorable. “We’re both obviously hungover. I just didn’t want you to go home and fall asleep and forget.”

I retain my sigh. If he weren’t so cute, I’d mince him with my words, but I have to respect a guy who’s looking out for his best interests as well as mine. We both know I’d be the mom at playdates with a thirty-ounce tumbler filled with wine.

“You’re a medic, not a doctor. I know how my birth control works and have been testing its effectiveness for a long time. But thanks for the concern, lover boy.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you.”

I wave my hand vaguely as I search the floor for my favorite red thong. “Whatever, it’s forgotten. This was fun, you know?” I tug on my bottoms and spin to him with my hands

on my hips. He really is cute in that masculine clean-cut sort of way. His hair is longish, brown, and messily styled in a way that looks, well, like he does right now. As though he just rolled out of bed and ran his hands through the strands. Lines surround his eyes, most likely from hours of laughter and time spent in the sun rather than age.

“What does that mean?” He climbs unsteadily to his own naked feet. I have to tamp down the part of me that wonders if I gave him the same shaky legs he gave me.

“It means we’ve been friends for a long time, and we’re still friends. One night of really nice drunken sex doesn’t have to ruin that.”

An eyebrow arches, and he releases a menacing growl. “*Nice?*”

I smirk, giving his body a slow perusal. Tan skin encasing cut muscles. Delineated quads rise to glutes I could bounce a quarter off, and all that beneath a chiseled torso that would make any living, breathing, warm-blooded woman drool. I don’t care how old you are, Sister Teri from the convent would be tempted to trade in her habit for a glimpse of this man. Nathan must spend every moment between calls in the gym because I never would have expected to find that hidden beneath his uniform.

Biting my lip, I nod. “Yeah. *Nice.*”

“Do you need me to show you again exactly how nice I can be?” He holds his hands out to the sides, palms facing me. “Because I have all day to provide a thorough demonstration.”

My sexual motor revs up for a day at the racetrack. *Vroom, vroom.* Hold on Indy 500, this is not what we signed up for when we stumbled drunkenly to his house last night.

“As *nice* as that sounds, I do need to get going. But you can call me anytime if you want a repeat. You know where to find me.”

Nathan snorts, tugging on boxer briefs that finally put that beautiful package in its proper place, and then props his hands on trim hips. It’s unfair that men can look like that after a night

of booze and sex, and I'm over here looking like a swamp witch who demands riddles to cross her bridge.

"I'm pretty sure I could track you down day or night."

I nod eagerly before remembering this was a one-night thing, and I shouldn't act like an enthusiastic puppy. I cover quickly by pulling my purse strap over my head and shrug. "It was a great night, and as much as I enjoyed it, this should remain a one-time thing. We wouldn't want to ruin our friendship or our relationship with Cami."

He gestures me out of the bedroom so I take the lead, cognizant of the trembling in my legs. The suggestion to leave belongs to me, meaning the sinking in my gut is inexplicable. I don't expect him to tie me to his bed to keep me here, but a teensy bit of begging me to stay would have been nice.

There's that stupid word again.

"Cami is our best friend. She'll be beside herself when she hears about us hooking up. She's been trying to set me up ever since she turned me down herself." His grin is adorably shy and sends flips through my belly.

"I didn't know you were so eager to share our sexcapades. I wasn't planning on telling her." *Fibber*. I already texted her last night when I went home with him.

"You and I both know that's bullshit. You already told her you were with me."

My back stiffens in wonder.

"How do you—?"

"Your number one rule is to always let someone know where you are and who you're with. Also, she sent me a text last night and threatened to kick my ass if I acted anything less than a gentleman."

Nathan advances until my back presses to the wall beside his front door. His head dips, lips barely a breath away from mine, and his steel forearms land against the wall on either side of my head, caging me in.

“Did I pass?” he whispers, the movement touching his mouth to mine.

“Pass?”

“The best friend test.” Half his mouth hitches in a cocky smirk, drawing my gaze from his eyes back to his lips.

Realizing my hands hang at my sides like two stupid limp noodles, I lift them to rest on that sexy muscle chiseled above his hips. It elicits another shiver from me. His brown eyes darken as if to say *I felt that*. Oh, what is it about this man that turns my confident self into a quivering mess?

“Y-yeah. I’d say you passed.”

“Good.”

He plants his mouth on mine, pressing me tighter against the wall, and maneuvers his thigh into the space between my legs. The slight pressure nearly has me coming out of my skin as I discourage myself from grinding against him. As I slide my fingers into his unruly hair to take him deeper, he pulls away.

I’m left standing with my mouth gaping, struggling for a breath as he looks down at me sexily.

“Do you need a ride?”

My brain misfires from the scorching kiss. “Uh, no. I got it. My car’s a block away.”

“Get home safe, then. I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

*Fu-crap.*

I may have forgotten that we worked together while I was busy doing the horizontal tango with him for the past twelve hours. Don’t get me wrong, I’m completely okay with having sex with a friend. The problem is somewhere between shots three and four of tequila last night, I lost the piece of information that said I’d be seeing him on his shift rotation for the next five days.

Mental note to call Cami ASAP and ask her to be a human buffer. Scratch that. I’m acting insane. This is fine. This is

Nathan, of all people. He's the kindest, least judgmental person I've ever met. He won't make things weird between us, especially at work. But is it a little weird that I could describe in detail what he looks like naked, and how good he is at using his tongue...?

"Hey, you okay?"

"Yep! The hangover is hitting me. I need something to eat, and I'll be good as new."

Nathan rubs his right ear against his shoulder. "You want to stay for a bite to eat?" His soft voice puts me at ease.

"No, but thank you. I should go. Burrito calls and all that."

Oh my god, why, Kiersten? I'm as suave as an elephant on stilts. I reach behind me and twist the door handle. It pops open harder than I expect, and I stumble through the doorway. "I'll see you at work!"

His chuckle chases me out the door, and I skip down the steps. I don't look back until I reach the sidewalk in front of his house. Nathan leans against the doorjamb in nothing but his underwear, giving a little half wave and sexy half smirk when he catches me watching. Ugh, it's *so* not fair.

At least this isn't a true walk of shame. Besides my blond hair looking like I stuck my finger in an electrical socket, the pair of shorts and tee I wore to the bar last night appear perfectly normal for a Sunday morning stroll. I could've been forced to walk down main street in a pair of stilettos and little black dress. Now that'd be a shot to my ego, speaking strictly from experience.

A brisk ten-minute walk later, I reach my red Honda Civic behind the bar. After swinging past the Main Street diner for the loaded breakfast burrito I couldn't stop thinking about, I find myself back at my empty house. A sigh escapes as I flop onto my brown microfiber couch. Kicking my feet out in front of me, I prop them on my antique coffee table.

After inhaling my burrito, texting Cami and Nathan that I'm home and alive, and taking my pill that I brought out before I sat down, I roll into my soft cushion, drag the throw

off the back of the couch, and promptly pass out while thinking of the glamorous life of a single thirty-something.

So. Freaking. Glamorous.

[Keep Reading](#)

ALSO BY A. M. WILSON

Where We Meet Again

**An unexpected pregnancy by a man wielding sweet words and empty promises forced Cami to flee from home.**

At sixteen, she gathered her torn and tattered heart, determined to construct the best life for her daughter.

Years after settling down in Arrow Creek, West Virginia, her life flourishes in all areas but one—love. She's convinced the sacrifice is necessary to keep her daughter happy and a roof over their heads.

Until she stumbles into her childhood best friend Lawrence 'Law' Briggs at the local coffee shop, and a painful confrontation ensues.

Their long-buried feelings for one another quickly resurface and challenge a carefully constructed reality. Her strength wavers as Law's reappearance exposes half-truths, and memories flood through the barrier.

Her daughter is a gift she'd never regret, even if it meant she lost him forever. Dark secrets hold them apart. The deepest betrayal imaginable.

Years of hurt and suffering can't disguise that Law's love remains, and Cami's is equal in measure. But is love enough to find a way forward through their murky past?

---

When Morning Comes

There are worse things than getting knocked up by your best friend. Right?

Kiersten won't make excuses for living her very best life. But being the life of the party has its downsides—like waking up naked next to her best friend.

Ever since Nathan's wife died a few years ago, he's avoided commitment. He went from living the family life to a one-and-done mentality. Until Kiersten breaks the news.

She's pregnant with his baby.

She shoves him back in the friend zone. But there's no return to normal when he's already falling in love with her.

Convincing her that his affection runs deeper than their new reality isn't an easy feat. Not when her lips are his addiction, and her touch is a brand. He's determined to become more than friends.

Kiersten wants to play it safe, but Nathan is ready for risks. The problem is relationships can go south fast.

And they might learn the truth about what's worse than getting knocked up by your best friend.

Losing them forever.



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### What Tears Us Down

**Rhett Senova could charm a woman out of her panties and in the next breath, thank her mother for dinner.**

*Smooth* doesn't even begin to cover his moves. But the hottest playboy in Arrow Creek wasn't always this way.

He had dreams of a one-woman future, and the cry of his firstborn brought him to tears.

He never thought his wife would cheat on him with her boss.

Each day is a feud over the dream home he had built for his ex and learning to raise his young son without the jaded lens now coloring his world.

Starting over in his thirties isn't on his agenda. Not now that he's raised impenetrable walls. His ex left the sour taste of infidelity in his mouth, and he's not sure he can trust anyone new.

That is until he meets a vision passing through town and nearly gets mauled by her she-demon dog.

Her sassy wit makes other women seem inadequate, along with those luscious curves and burgundy curls.

The fact she hides beneath her tough exterior that she might be in trouble sends up red flags he'd be smart not to ignore.

Using his charm to win over the pit bull is the easy part. The question is whether he wants to win over the guarded redhead too.

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### Pitch Dark

One girl disappeared. After fifteen years, her cold lifeless body was found on the damp forest floor. Not an inch of her was unmarked by the horrors she endured.

Alone, malnourished, abused in horrific ways; this was how she died.

One girl was found walking the streets, covered in dirt and scars. She had no memory of who she was, where she came from, or what happened to her. Even though the marks on her body attested to years of heinous abuse, her strength shone through at every turn.

Revenge and justice were sworn.

Years of searching brought up nothing but dead ends. Detective Niko James was too late to save his childhood friend, but he vows not to let down another.

The clock is ticking and the trail is pitch dark.

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### Broad Daylight

Lightning never strikes twice in the same place. Or so they say...The small town of Westbridge isn't so lucky.

When his brother's best friend went missing eighteen years ago, Reece James swore to himself that the pain of loss would never touch him. Walls of concrete fortified his resolve, and as a grown man, he keeps to himself and works hard to earn an honest living. No wife, no kids, not even a dog to rely on him.

His quiet life is upended when strange things start happening to him. As the events escalate, he can't continue to blame the neighborhood kids who roam freely at night. Forced to report a break in, he anticipates a swift investigation and the person responsible to be caught.

What he doesn't expect is the woman he's loved in secret for twenty years to return to town and lead the investigation.

His attempt to protect Dani as kids was pathetic at best, but when his stalker gets wind of a woman in his life, no matter that she's merely investigating a case and nothing more, Reece will do anything to keep her out of harm's way. Including sacrificing himself.

What his captor has in store will rock the very foundation Reece lives upon and will force him to face his past head on for a chance at survival.

Poor Reece has no idea what's coming for him.

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### Indisputable

Eighteen year old Tatum Krause wants nothing more than to finish her senior year without any more drama. After the near overdose of her drug abusing mother the previous year, she moved out in the hopes of making something better for herself.

However, the week before her final year, she ends up needing the help of a sexy stranger who's about to flip her world on its axis.

Jacoby Ryan only wants one thing: to forget his past. The last two years have been filled with empty feelings and women in an attempt to stem the heartache and guilt. He's ghosted blindly through the motions until late one night he finds a car stalled on the side of an empty highway, where he meets a beautiful girl with a haunted look in her eyes.

She has a secret, but so does he. Despite their magnetic pull, the two come to the shocking revelation their relationship isn't so black and white. Is it possible to fight a bone-deep attraction when the entire universe is telling you it's wrong?

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### Unleashing Sin

My name is Alex 'Sin' Sinclair, and they don't call me Sin for nothin'.

After losing the person who meant everything to me, I lived up to the connotation. Sainly behavior wasn't in my repertoire when I f\*cked countless women. I made my home at the bottom of a bottle, and my only acquaintance was heroin.

I existed in my own personal hell while I vowed to end the lives responsible for ending her.

Then I found you.

Feeble, alone, needy. Everything I don't want. A distraction from the task I set my sights on years prior. I tried to resist you, but something about you calls to me. I'm not good for you, but the truth is, I think you're exactly what I need.

I pushed. You pulled. I tried to protect you from my darkness. You fought to pull me into a different light.

We became distracted.

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### Redesigning Fate (Revive Series Book 1)

When my boyfriend threw me down a flight of stairs, I knew there was only one place left to go—far, far away. I packed up my car and left everything I'd known for the nearly twenty-two years I've been alive. One hundred and fifty miles of highway separated me from the life I grew up with and the one I needed to find.

The same day I was offered a job in my new city, I met Elias. He was an enigma. A mystery. One that I wanted to uncover. One I didn't know if I could trust.

He pulled me in with adventure and the melodies of his guitar, but his secrets held me at a distance. He couldn't tell me about what he did for a living, or why he took phone calls in a different room.

Then my ex returned. Travis wove a sordid tale of danger; that he was only there to keep me safe from Elias.

I never expected truth to be nestled in his lies.

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### Resurrecting Her (Revive Series Book 2)

When I was kidnapped, half-truths were shared by the monster who took me. Half-truths that tested the bounds of my relationship.

A web of lies obliterated my last shred of security.

The man I love vows to protect me from both our demons, but in doing so, he treats me like glass.

I hold the secrets this time. They're slowly destroying me from the inside; igniting in me a fight for righteousness, even if that means leaving behind the ones I love.

Travis is still out there. Watching me. Waiting. And even though he's dangerous, he's not the only villain in this story.

---

His Deliverance (A Revive Series Novella)

Five years before *Redesigning Fate* comes Holt and Brandi's story...

My alias is Brixton Holt. Using my real name could get me killed. When the FBI needed a man undercover, I was the perfect candidate. Unattached and an all-around badass.

Two years of infiltrating the largest sex trafficking ring in the country, I feel as dirty as the monsters I work for. That is, until she catches my eye.

I call her Brandi. Her real name is no longer significant. She knows the rules. Nobody leaves unless it's in a box—a shipping crate or a coffin. My first mistake was following orders.

**The second? Falling in love.**

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Revive: The Series

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A. M. Wilson is a *USA TODAY* Bestselling Author. She loves infusing her stories with real life—the good, the bad, and the steamy parts. There’s something special about that pivotal moment when two characters realize their love for each other, but she likes wading through a little angst to get there. When she isn’t furiously typing on her computer, she can be found searching for her next all-consuming read. A. M. lives in Minnesota with her husband, two children, and black lab.

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