

A romantic couple embracing at sunset. The man is on the left, wearing a dark grey sweater, and is kissing the woman on the cheek. The woman is on the right, wearing a white off-the-shoulder sweater, and has long, wavy red hair. They are both smiling and looking towards each other. The background is a soft, golden sunset sky over a body of water.

all of you

WINDY GROVE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

S . M . WEST

All of You

A Winslow Grove Novel

S.M. West

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Have you read the prequel novella to All of You?

For the best reading experience, you should.

Grab your copy of [Close to You](#) now!

*“It’s always been yours, I cannot find another this heart will
beat for.”*

~ S.L. Gray

Playlist

Listen on [Spotify](#).

“I Wait for You” – Alex G

“Thinkin Bout You” – Frank Ocean

“In Your Love” – Tyler Childers

“Cinnamon Girl” – Lana Del Rey

“Bring Me Home” – G Flip

“Looking Out for You” – Joy Again

“Written in the Stars” – The Girl and The Dreamcatcher

“Sad Song” – We The Kings feat. Elena Coats

“Unforgettable” – Thomas Rhett

Chapter 1

Wren

“**O**liver Winslow is a catch,” a woman croons near where I stand out of sight, panting with my arms loaded with returned books.

I couldn’t agree more, but who is she? Before I take a peek, another woman adds seductively, “He can put his boots under my bed any day.”

Tittering follows the suggestive comment. It sounds like there are three, maybe four women standing close to the checkout desk. I should step out from the stacks and make my presence known.

Before I do, another voice, this one more familiar, chides, “All right, ladies, enough of that. The real question is why Dot doesn’t marry the man already? I mean, they’ve changed the wedding date—what...three, four times already?—only drawing out the engagement. Something’s going on there.”

Like a bomb, my heart beats in my ears, counting down to something I’m dreading though I’m not sure what. Is it everyone finding out that Oliver and I are together when he has been seemingly taken by Dot for what feels like forever? Or is it something more pressing, like Oliver’s absence?

The sweat, already gathered at the nape of my neck from running around the library, chills. Of all the conversations I could stumble upon, it has to be about the man I love. And as if to add salt to a wound, they’re talking about his supposed marriage to Dot Malone.

My agitated thoughts freeze when another woman says, “Well, Dot insists they’ll be married in January, come hell or high water.”

Okay, that’s it.

I can’t listen to this any longer. Not when the scorching memories of Oliver and me in the high school gym have consumed every second of my existence since that night. That was the last time I saw or heard him.

No matter how magical and unforgettable our time together was, that was two days ago. Two days of unbearable silence from Oliver Winslow.

As each second ticks by, the questions and doubts continue to pile up. The weight of it all keeps me from sleeping and eating. Since then, like plucking the petals off a flower, I’ve played my own tortured version of he loves me, he loves me not. Did he leave town or not?

Clearing my throat, I emerge from the stacks, arms aching and still loaded down with books. All four women stop their gabbing to stare at me. Of course, among them is Lara Crandall, the voice I recognized, flawless in her red pantsuit, sleek black bob, and makeup that would give Kylie Jenner a run for her money.

Lara plasters on her obligatory smile. “Wren. Why, hello. We wondered where you were.”

“Lara, nice to see you. Ladies.” I grab the top book from the pile I’m carrying and shove it onto a shelf. “I was putting away the last of the returned books.”

Inwardly, I cringe at my knee-jerk need to explain myself to this woman. I run the library, for goodness’ sake, and at thirty-five, she’s only ten years older than I am. The fact that she had been my babysitter when I was seven for one god-awful year doesn’t mean I forever answer to her.

Often, I’d wished that her older sister, who is now the principal of the high school, had babysat me. She’s much kinder and more rational than Lara.

My strained smile tugs awkwardly at my cheeks. “May I help you with anything?”

“No. No. We found what we came in for.” She sniffs, nose in the air, and waves a copy of *The Grapes of Wrath* at me. “For *our* book club.” Her razor-like tone nicks at my chest, most probably intended.

She’s still miffed about the book clubs, activities, and programs I had the audacity to introduce to the town. Before that, Lara was Winslow Grove’s self-appointed organizer of the *only* book club in town, among other things. And to add insult to injury, I never had the decency to consult her before rolling out all these things. Unfortunately, I overheard her say those very words to her posse and anyone else who will listen.

“Great choice.” My lips press together to hold back a snicker. This will be her book club’s fourth attempt at Steinbeck’s Great American Novel. “Well, if you’re all good, I should get back to it. Have a good night, ladies.” I turn and start to walk away, glad to be done with this conversation.

Lara is among a small handful of people in Winslow Grove who feel this is *their* town, and since her husband’s a state trooper, she somehow thinks that makes her the law of our town as well. While Winslow Grove is truly a wonderful place, and the only home I’ve ever known, some of our residents can be insufferable.

“Oh, Wren.” The pointed pitch of my name pokes me in the back and causes me to falter.

I should turn around yet I can’t bring myself to face her. Not when I’m sure she’s gearing up to deliver a final blow. She closes the distance between us, slides into my line of sight, and glares up at me.

Great, this is going to be good.

“You know.” Her lips curl upward in what looks like her version of the Red Queen’s creepy smirk from *Alice in Wonderland*. “I’m still waiting on an update about that program of yours. What’s it called again?”

Sharper than a knife, not much gets by Lara. She darn well knows the name, among other things, of the program I'm hoping to launch within the month. Instead of saying so, I bite the inside of my cheek. I need to play nice despite her condescension. The program needs her support, or more importantly, the kids need the program.

"It's called Bright Horizons." I clasp my hands together to crush my desire to wring her neck. I'd never do it, although it's fun to imagine. "Nothing has changed since we last spoke. I've been working with the kids on their college applications since the end of their junior year and they're all submitted. The proposal for the program has been with the city council now for over two weeks. They say it will take about a month before I'll hear anything. I'm hoping for the green light in a couple of weeks."

"You know, I could've helped Jack with his application." Her gaze flits to the boy behind the counter, and to his credit, Jack seems riveted by something on the computer. I'm pretty sure he can hear every word. "I was accepted to every college I applied to, and like I've said from the beginning, I'd be more than happy to help. You've already got your hands full with all this."

She waves a hand flippantly at the library, suggesting the complete opposite of what her words imply. My job is inconsequential. Why does she continually test my patience?

"That's very kind of you." The word *kind* burns my tongue. "I have it under control, but I'll definitely keep you in mind."

"Wonderful." Her mouth twists like she's pained. What is this? Opposite day?

Conversation done, she marches to the front desk with her minions dutifully at her heels. Poor Jack. He has to deal with her.

While Lara hasn't said it outright, many—including my father and me—believe she wishes Bright Horizons had been her idea. Next to laying down the law, she likes nothing better

than the praise and spotlight that comes with running things. She's the *Gilmore Girls*' Taylor Doose of Winslow Grove.

Jack, one of the kids who will benefit from Bright Horizons and the student Lara will sponsor, looks to me from behind the counter. "Miss Wren, I'll take care of these ladies."

Tall and all limbs, he directs his sweet smile to Lara. If I didn't know him better, and didn't recognize the small twitch in his left eyebrow, I'd think he was looking forward to the exchange.

"Thank you, Jack." I traipse over to a row of shelves to offload the last of the books while he charms the ladies.

Jack doesn't officially work at the library, though I'd love nothing more than to give him a job. Unfortunately, I have no funding to do so, and while a paycheck would be nice, that's not why he does it. Like a few others in the town, he volunteers because he enjoys the library and we're friends. Most days, he drops in after school to do his homework and I help him where I can. Once done, he usually stays to help out.

When I emerge from an aisle, arms free and tingling with relief, the women are walking out the door. Immediately, the air shifts to something lighter, more serene. I love this place so much, especially like this. While not big, the library is a simple two-story house built in the mid-eighteen hundreds by the first Winslow family, the founders of our town.

Since the day I learned to read, this has been my second home, and working here is a dream come true. I love to walk among all these books, share recommendations with the townsfolk, and sometimes, if I'm lucky, find my next great read.

"Jack, why don't you head home." According to the clock on the wall, there are only fifteen minutes until eight. "It's practically closing time."

"All right, Miss Wren." He bends to grab his school bag.

"Don't worry about your bio test. You know your stuff. Go home and relax."

Chuckling, he saunters from behind the counter. “Reggie doesn’t let us rest until chores are done.” He clears his throat, and the next words out of his mouth are an octave or two higher as he mimics his foster mom. “You know what they say about idle hands.”

“That sounds like something she’d say.”

Regina Daly, or more affectionately known as Reggie, lives in a big, old mansion on the outskirts of town and, for as long as I can remember, has fostered children. Sometimes as many as eight. She has the space, the means, and the patience. In the eyes of the town, she is considered a saint, but to Reggie, it is her calling.

As we saunter, side by side, to the door, Jack hikes his bag strap higher on his shoulder. “You sure you don’t want me to stick around and help clean up?”

“No, I got this. Thank you. You have a good night and say hi to Reggie, Courtney, and Brayden.”

“You too.” He pushes the door open, letting a gust of the crisp fall air in. “Court’s not going to be happy that you helped me study.”

Jack, along with Reggie’s other foster kids, Courtney and Brayden, are the inaugural recipients of the Bright Horizons program. Reggie and my mother were close and when Mom died, Reggie kind of fostered me in a different sort of way. With a younger sister to care for, I needed the guidance and, often times, the help with Percy. Drowning in grief, Pop didn’t have the presence of mind to help with either. I learned a lot about the foster care system during the time Percy and I spent at Reggie’s.

When I learned that once foster kids age out of care at eighteen, there is little to no support for them, I was both sad and angry. Many foster kids are undereducated and unqualified for jobs.

This tragic disparity became all the more real with what happened to our very own Serena, Percy’s best friend and one of Reggie’s kids. When she was unable to finish college due to

her circumstances, my heart broke for her. I then became all the more determined to figure out a way to help foster kids who wanted to go to college.

That's why I came up with Bright Horizons. My wish is to expand that support to more than education. Baby steps. I need to get this program approved by the city council first.

Jack's growing lopsided grin pulls me back to our conversation, and I smile in return. "You tell Court she's welcome here anytime to study, do homework, or whatever."

"All right. G'night." He waves, then saunters out across the dark parking lot and down Main Street.

With my nose pressed against the glass, I peer out into the quiet darkness. Oliver and the persistent question of *Where the heck is he?* screams in my mind.

Both my hands lie flat on my stomach as I hope to quell the constant churning of my nerves. If only I could talk to him and find out what's going on. When we parted the morning after our night in the gym, we didn't exchange numbers.

Funny how we've known each other for most of our lives, and at one time knew almost everything about one another. Now, despite having sex the other night, there's so much I don't know about him. Not even his phone number.

In fairness, we didn't really have time for much of anything once Coach sprang us from the gym. Time slipped away like dandelion seeds in the wind, and all I could think about was leaving before Coach asked too many questions.

He's my father's friend. I didn't need Coach Bell telling Pop what he thought Oliver and I got up to that night. *Good God, no.*

I could get my hands on Oliver's number, if I tried. Call him. Have the talk I so desperately want yet also dread. I won't.

Maybe it's pride or plain old foolishness. He knows how to find me. And maybe that's it—he doesn't want to find me. Or worse, he's left town. Gone.

Shaking off the unbearable weight of uncertainty, I shut down the computer, secure the register, tidy the ground floor, and lock the door. Then I venture to the second floor to do a final walk-through.

The upstairs is two-thirds the size of below and mostly open space. Unlike the ground floor, it's dense with bookshelves, oversized chairs, a sofa, and bean bags. It's meant to feel like a cozy living room.

I stumble to a halt at movement on the other side of the stacks and freeze in place, breath suspended.

I should be alone. *What the heck?*

A faint swoosh, similar to the one only a beat ago, drives a shudder through me. I check my pockets, looking for my phone, in case I have to call for help. Oh no, my phone is downstairs.

That's okay. Everything is going to be all right. There has to be a simple explanation for the noise. No one's there. And even if there is, for the most part, the people of Winslow Grove are kind and friendly, and the library isn't exactly the place to rob.

Not wanting to overthink or scare myself any more than I already have, I clear my throat and project a strong, confident voice. "Who's there?"

At first, everything stills, the air thick with a quiet that only trails in just before a storm. Nothing. Did I imagine the noise? Movement?

But no. More rustling breaks out only feet away as someone or something moves again. Before I can react, scream, or run, hands grab me from behind with a strong grip around my waist and my feet fly up from the ground.

I kick and scream for my life as everything happens in a flash. I barely register the familiar fresh pine scent or the deep rumble of laughter. It's only when my feet land firmly on the floor a few seconds later and the culprit twirls me around to face him that my heart finally slows. Kind of.

I slap at the broad, solid shoulder in front of me. “Oliver. What the hell?”

His hazel eyes sparkle with mischief and he grins from ear to ear. “Sorry, Tyler.” His hands still anchor my waist. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

I shove him again, this time with both hands. And this time, when my splayed palms push against his chiseled chest, they stay there for a beat or two longer than warranted.

Oliver Winslow.

Warm and solid.

Can I say *mine*?

He didn’t leave town.

I can’t stop staring, afraid to blink and break this moment. I’m too worried this is all a cruel dream. I can’t stop touching him, reveling in his warmth and playful expression.

He frowns and pulls me closer, capturing my hands on his chest between us. “Wren. Say something. What’s wrong?”

Abruptly, I escape his arms and cross mine over my middle. I’m far too vulnerable for this conversation. “Why has it taken you two days to talk to me?”

Chapter 2

Oliver

Wren's soft, full lips thin, all the blood draining from them, the longer she stares at me. She isn't happy to see me. Or more to the point, she isn't happy that it's taken me two days to see her after our time in the gym. The pained tone to her question says as much.

"Shit, Tyler, you have to believe me. I wanted to go after you when you left the gym, but Coach..." My heart gallops with the urgent desire to get through to her.

I didn't deliberately take my sweet-ass time in getting to her.

"What about him?"

"He insisted I stay. He wanted to talk about his upcoming retirement. He said he was disappointed in me for not immediately throwing my name in the ring for his position. He went on about how I'd head the athletics department, coach football, and also get to teach."

"You didn't *have to* talk to him just then. It's nothing he didn't already tell you, right?"

"Tyler, you know Coach. He doesn't *ask*, he tells. I had no choice but to hear him out. By the time I got to the parking lot, you were gone. I did look for you. After showering and changing at Eddie's, I came to the library to talk to you."

Before I can say anymore, her doubtful expression becomes more conciliatory as does her tone. "You found the

library closed because we didn't have any power. I wasn't here."

"Right."

The storm knocked out the power, and during the night it came back on at the high school. This wasn't the case for other areas of the town. The library was among some of the businesses closed the following day due to the power outage.

"Okay, so that was yesterday. What about last night? Or all day today?" She isn't letting me off the hook and I can't blame her. I'd probably do the same in her shoes.

"I went to your house and you weren't there either. Then Eddie called, needing help at the garage. He didn't have any power either. After helping him and a few others in town, I went back to your place but you still weren't there."

She nibbles on her lip. "It sounds like we had the same kind of day. I ended up helping Pop at the Grill. The restaurant didn't have any electricity either, but you know him. That man is stubborn. He insisted on opening."

"Sounds about right. How were you able to cook without power?" I clench my jaw and internally admonish myself for not going to her family's restaurant. That's on me for assuming the Grill was closed like so many other businesses that day.

"You remember the portable gas grill he'd bring when we went camping?" Her silly smile causes the corners of my mouth to lift, and I nod.

We're probably thinking about the same thing—all those summers we spent during our childhood in the mountains camping with her parents. And even after her mom died, Pop still took us. Fishing, hiking, and roasting marshmallows by the campfire.

"He had four portable grills. Don't ask me why. Percy trimmed down the menu and we opened for lunch, closed for a few hours, and opened again for the dinner rush. It really helped some of the families in town who didn't have any electricity."

“That’s Pop for you.” I can picture him manning those small grills like a fully functional, state-of-the-art kitchen. “Where did you end up going after that? I came by your place at nearly ten last night.”

“I stayed at Pop’s in my old room. I do that sometimes even though I’ve been out on my own for a while now.” She shrugs and her gaze drifts from mine.

Her obvious evasion causes me to wonder what she might be holding back. I don’t want her to keep things from me or to second-guess what she can and can’t say around me.

Cautiously, I walk toward her like she’s a skittish cat, and I fear she may flee.

“I’m sorry I didn’t find you yesterday.”

To my relief, she stays put, expression inviting, almost eager. My hand wraps around the nape of her elegant neck, and her lashes flutter as her eyes close. Soft floral notes mixed with the warm inviting scent of Wren hit my senses. Instantly, I’m complete and, for the first time since we parted at the gym, calm.

“And today, well...” I hate to bring up the one person who is sure to kill the mood, but I don’t want secrets between us or half-truths. “I had to speak to Dot. Tell her about us before she heard around town, and well, that became a thing.”

Her eyes flash wide as clouds of worry blanket her usually glittering eyes. “How so?”

“I couldn’t find her.”

“What do you mean?”

“I looked for her in the usual places but nothing. I texted her and I’m still unread. And while I didn’t want to go by the house, I eventually did. Again, she wasn’t there.”

I didn’t actually go inside the house. Not since I no longer live there, and her car wasn’t in the driveway.

“Are you worried about her?”

I chuckle to lessen the apprehension etching her brow. I'm not in the least bit concerned, not in the way Wren implies. Dot isn't a nice person, and if anyone will come out on top, no matter the situation, it's Dot.

My need to tell her is more about testing the waters, so to speak. Even though we've been over for a couple of years, she won't take the news well. And there's nothing worse than a scorned Dot Malone.

"No. For all I know, she's at her parents' place or went out of town for a few days. She's usually at the Nest on Tuesdays so I'll talk to her there tomorrow."

At the mention of my business, I grimace at the sudden foul taste in my mouth. Dot won't sell me her half of the Nest, not to mention what her father might do once he hears I want it back—that I've left Dot. I'm gearing up for a battle on all fronts.

Dammit. I don't like regretting things. But one thing is for sure; I regret Dot.

I don't want to think about Dot right now.

My fingers tighten their grip on Wren's soft flesh and I slide in closer, wrapping my other arm around her waist. I draw her slender body against mine.

Sweet Jesus, I am home.

My hand glides up from her neck to cradle the back of her head, and I angle her just so. I kiss her forehead and drink in her essence. This is what I've been missing all day.

Her strength.

Her beauty.

Her serene, resilient presence.

She's all I need.

For now.

Forever.

Her arms slip around my waist and she looks into my eyes, expectantly. “And when you find her...what is it that you’ll say?”

“I will tell her I’m here to stay. That we’re together and that she’s run out of time.”

“Hang on a sec. You said a lot there. You’re staying? In Winslow Grove.”

“I sure am.”

“What changed your mind?”

I cock my head to one side and give her my best are-you-shitting-me grin. “You really have to ask? You.” My lips press a kiss to the tip of her nose. “There’s no way I’m leaving Winslow Grove now.”

“Why?”

“Are you kidding me? There isn’t a chance in hell I’d walk away from you. Not when I’ve loved and wanted you for most of my life. Not when I just found out you feel the same way.” My fingers gently squeeze her neck. “Not when I finally get to have you.”

I pull back slightly and stare intently into her brown eyes. So much is going on in those warm, dark depths, and I can’t shake the feeling that uncertainty is mixed in there.

Clearing my throat, unsure I want the answer and yet needing to know, I steel my spine. “Unless something has changed for you since then?”

“Oh God, Oliver, stop.” She pushes onto the tips of her toes and kisses me long and sweet before breaking our connection with a head shake. “I mean don’t stop. You love me?”

“Always have. Even when I didn’t stand a chance with you. I knew my heart would always belong to you.”

Her face lights like the sky on the Fourth of July. “I love you too.”

Cheeks flushed and eyes sparkling, she's beautiful and finally mine. I'm the happiest man alive.

"How do you think Dot will react?" Her concern causes me to stiffen, and I force a stilted chuckle.

"I doubt she'll take it well." Tension runs taut and sharp like barbed wire between my shoulder blades.

And I regret my candor when Wren silently mirrors my reaction, body tensing. "I was worried about that."

Dot comes from a powerful and well-to-do family. Her father's the mayor and has spoiled his only daughter rotten. She doesn't know what it's like to lose. For as long as I can remember, I'm all she's wanted. Heck, I stuck around for two damn years—even when we were long over—just to avoid her wrath and threats.

My business is at risk, not to mention the potential damage she could do to my family legacy. I will share every nasty detail with Wren, but not now. Tonight is about us. Tomorrow we'll deal with the horrible reality of Dot.

"Listen, don't worry about her. I'm not going to tell her about the gym. My lips are sealed. Although, we both know that news travels fast and Coach isn't exactly discreet." The mention of our night in the gym does the trick and her cheeks redden more, the pretty flush dipping down her neck as she ducks her head.

With my fingers, I tip her chin up to look into her eyes. "Dot shouldn't be surprised to hear that I want to be with you. I never hid from her or anyone else just how much I care about you and how important you are to me."

"Oh." She doesn't sound all that relieved or happy. "What did you mean when you said she has run out of time?"

I blow out a breath—all this Dot talk is more than killing the mood. If only I could turn back time and turn her down when she first asked me out. My hesitation at the invitation should've clued me in that it was a terrible idea.

"I'm talking about how I'd given her plenty of time after we broke up to tell everyone we were done. I was even willing

to let her tell everyone she broke it off. I just wanted things to be over.”

She frowns and I get it. Things haven't changed since then. Everyone still thinks Dot and I are together.

I heave another sigh. “Dot has dragged this out for two years, and I foolishly have kept quiet. Her time's up because I'm no longer waiting.” My thumb gently rubs the juncture between her neck and collarbone. “You and I are together now, and I'm not going to hide or lie about it. Now, enough about Dot.” With my arm tight around her waist, I pick up Wren once more, and she squeals. This time she doesn't fight me. “You hungry?”

I march us to the nook where I was hiding and put her down. She takes in the spread-out blanket on the floor, two foil-wrapped sandwiches, and a large thermos. Beers chill in a small metal ice bucket on a nearby table.

“What is all this?” She peers at me over her shoulder. “How did you... When did you do this? Get this all set up without me seeing? I've been here all afternoon and evening.”

“I know. This is dinner. Grilled cheese and tomato soup. Not glamorous but comforting.” I pull her down onto the blanket with me. “I had to sneak in and out whenever you were busy. Let's just say, I was grateful for the boatload of returned books. And I really should thank Mr. Kline for all his trips to the front desk to ask you to show him how to work the microfiche.”

Her eyes widen. “Did you set that up?”

“Nope. I wish I'd thought of it. The way I see things, it was divine intervention or the universe helping me pull this together. We're celebrating.”

“Celebrating what?”

“The rest of our lives together.” On my hands and knees, I prowl toward her until I'm close enough for my lips to crash onto hers.

We kiss and kiss until my own doubt creeps into my head, abruptly halting all pleasure. Maybe I'm moving too fast or

assuming too much?

I reluctantly pull away. “Wait a sec. That is, if you’re willing to spend the rest of your life with me?”

She cups my face with her hands, a slight tremble to them, and licks her bottom lip. “Oliver Winslow, are you asking me to marry you?”

“Tyler, when I ask you to marry me, you’ll know. This is a promise to ask.” I wink and she plants an open-mouthed kiss on me.

I can feel her joy in the curve of her lips as she slides her tongue along mine. My hands wander from her waist down to the smooth fabric of her pant leg and then my fingers curl around her ankle.

She swallows my groan and I rip my mouth from hers. “You’re wearing pants.”

“Uh, yes. You’re kind of stating the obvious, Twist.”

I chuckle at my nickname and kiss her neck. “I wish you were in a dress or skirt like you were the other night.”

Flashes of us in the gym crowd my mind in the best way possible. Her soaked panties. The easy access to all of her. The way her snug channel squeezed both my fingers and cock.

Sweet baby J, help me.

I lick my lips suggestively. “Besides, I owe you.”

“Owe me?”

“Remember when Coach showed up, I wanted to go down on you...”

“Oliver.” She does that adorably bashful thing of covering her face with her hands for a few seconds and then removes them. Face aflame, gaze heavy-lidded. “You don’t play fair.”

“You suggested we take it back to your place later when Coach was seconds away from springing us. I figured, why not here?”

She moans, teeth biting at her bottom lip before she gives her head a little shake. “Um, well.” She fans herself and picks up one of the foil wrappers only to place it back down on the blanket. “So we are eating here?”

The abrupt change in topic pinches the center of my chest.

“Sure. We eat. Then we have some more fun and I eat you.”

She squirms on the spot, trying to bring her legs together and quell what must be a growing need for me to do what I’m promising. My chest can’t help but swell at how responsive she is to the idea of my mouth on her.

I hand her a grilled cheese sandwich, and instead of taking it, she straightens. “Oliver, I’m not so sure about doing it here. We could eat and then head back to my place.”

“We could... I just thought... This is one of my fantasies.”

“What is?”

“To have *you* in the library.”

“Me?” She blushes and her lashes flutter.

“Yes. *You*. In a pencil skirt. No panties. My mouth on you. Wren, you have no fucking idea how badly I want to taste you. How it’s all I’ve thought about since you left the gym.”

A strangled whimper rips from her mouth, and she gathers her long hair in a ponytail and lifts it off her neck as if she’s burning up. “Forget about my place.”

She drops her red hair, and my breath catches. I’m so mesmerized by the way her silky locks tumble down her back that I almost fall backward when suddenly, her lips are everywhere. Wren kisses my jaw, my lips, my neck, fueled by a hunger I’ve never experienced before. It’s like she can’t get enough of me, fast enough.

Reluctantly, I pull back, her hesitation still very much at the forefront of my mind. I want to respect her wishes.

“If we go to your place, do we get to keep the lights on?”

We lost power soon after getting stuck in the gym. Our insanely glorious night together was in sheer darkness, and while I wouldn't trade it for anything, I only wish the lights had been on.

I have to see just how far down her luscious body her beautiful blush spreads.

Wren laughs and bites her bottom lip. "You've been thinking about that too, huh. We'll definitely keep the lights on."

Chapter 3

Wren

Oliver follows me home in his truck. During the short drive from the library to my small two-story house, our conversation runs through my mind. I should be satisfied, happy even, yet something eats at me. Even as the embers of my desire for him—always there, always growing—slowly heat and unfurl within me.

Once inside, the door barely closes and he's on me, murmuring into my mouth something about if I'm hungry we can eat now. He removes my jacket and drops it.

Thud.

The sound of my coat hitting the floor echoes like a jarring clang within me. It's the jolt I need.

I can't do this. "Twist, wait."

His fingers continue to work the buttons of my top, and his head dips toward mine for another kiss. He hasn't heard me, and I hesitate to push with more force on his chest.

"Oliver. We need to talk."

Stilling, he blinks several times as if trying to figure out who I am. Like I'm unrecognizable, and my chest aches, tightening as if it might cave in. Should I be doing this?

He rubs at the back of his neck. "Oh. Okay. What do you want to talk about?"

"The two years with Dot when nothing was going on between you two, and everyone thought you were together..."

“Yeah...” He stares and I can’t form any words. He eases backward until he hits the arm of the sofa and slumps against it. “What’s your question, Wren?” His gaze sharpens on me despite the tenderness in his tone.

“It isn’t that I don’t believe you, but... two years.”

I haven’t truly asked him anything yet my gut churns, partially wanting to retreat and never venture down this path again. Yet I can’t shy away from this. I want—no, *need*—to know. The doubt isn’t something I can live with.

We grew apart because of what I believed was his lack of interest in me, passing me over for another, and not just any other. Dot. While I know now it was a lie, it still stings.

In fact, this hits a little too close to my father passing me over when Mom died. While he probably didn’t mean to, suddenly he treated me like an adult, not a grieving child, and all of my wants and needs were shoved aside.

Where Dot is concerned, I need to know how and why he stuck around so long if things were really over. I don’t want to be stepping into a relationship that isn’t truly over even if it’s with Oliver Winslow.

Oliver’s deep, gentle tone jerks me out of my doubts. “Tyler. What’s going on in that head of yours?”

He stretches his arm out to its full length, beckoning me to him. I’m rooted to the spot, and no matter how much I want to go to him, I don’t. I can’t or else all reason will leave me.

“Oliver, look, I’m a big girl. You were engaged to Dot. So if things were rocky during that time, but you weren’t over, or things weren’t clearly stated...I get it.”

“No. We had separate bedrooms. I didn’t go to any of her family events or holidays. We were done.” He studies me, a frown deeply etching his forehead. “You don’t believe me?”

“No. I do. It’s just...” I have to stop being wishy-washy. “I get you were trying to be the good guy and give her time to talk about the breakup in the way she wanted to.” I nibble on my bottom lip, trying to think how best to say the rest.

“I’m sensing there’s a but.”

“Yes. Why didn’t you leave when you realized she had no intention of telling anyone you were over? I don’t get it. It makes me wonder.”

“Wonder what?”

We’re now at the crux of things.

“Maybe you didn’t really want to break up with her?” The words are needles puncturing my chest.

“Fuck, no.” He bolts upright, now standing tall and taut. “I didn’t want things to get ugly. Dot wouldn’t even talk about dissolving our partnership at the Nest.” His jaw tightens and his lips thin. “Shit, it wasn’t even a partnership. I called it that to pacify her. I figured if I let her take the lead, things would go smoother.”

He told me about Dot’s entanglement in his business, and yet I sense there’s more. In the gym, he seemed willing to walk away from the Nest. And though he hasn’t said it, I doubt he wants to. I totally understand and don’t want that for him.

“Wren, I shouldn’t have let it go on as long as it did, but it’s over.”

I nod, not fully satisfied, though I now have a better understanding of why things are the way they are. There is more going on here, and in time, I’m sure Oliver will tell me. And if not, I’ll bring it up again.

He hauls me to him, eyes dipping to my mouth before he kisses me. It’s a kiss full of resolute assurance, restrained desire, and it’s all he couldn’t say with words. He’s with me, no one else.

We kiss and kiss like teenagers—for how long, I’m not sure—until I break away.

“I’m starving.”

He chuckles and leaves me to grab the insulated bag he dropped at the door. “I better feed you before you waste away.”

While he sets out the food on the kitchen table, Jordan, my Russian Blue cat saunters into the room.

“Oh, who’s this?” Oliver crouches to pet him and my boy hesitates, sizing him up.

“This is Jordan.” At his name, he strolls over to me and rubs against my calf.

We both watch the four-legged creature weave his way in and around my legs like a maze.

Oliver bends to pet him and in turn, he purrs. “So you finally got a cat.”

His statement causes me to smile, chest warming at how he remembered that I’d always wanted one.

“Yup. But of course, Pop uses Jordan as an excuse why I always have to go to his house.”

My father doesn’t like cats, and at one time, he even claimed to be allergic, only to be called out by my mom.

“Really?”

“Yeah, but he loves Gretzky so if I don’t bring him with me when I go over there, Pop eventually caves and comes here for a visit. He loves taking that guy for hikes with him.”

“Gretzky?” Oliver cocks his head to one side, puzzled, and I forget just how long we’ve been apart.

Since the gym, it feels like our time apart no longer exists though that’s far from true.

As if waiting in the wings for his turn to make his entrance, my three-year-old whippet scampers into the room.

“Hey, there.” I bend to pet him and he nuzzles into my hand. “Oliver, this is Gretzky.”

If it weren’t for my pets being different breeds, you’d believe they were siblings, both with their gray-blue coats.

Oliver shimmies closer and pets my dog. “He’s beautiful. They both are.” He looks up at me. “You’ve got a house full. Any more animals I should know about?”

“I’ve got tetras in my office. The door is always closed because of Jordan.”

“Tetras? What is that, fish?”

“Yeah. I’ll show you later.” I pull a chair out and sit. “Let’s eat.”

With my first bite of the warm sandwich, I almost cry. Oliver always did make the best grilled cheese. He uses an obscene amount of butter and cheese. During high school, Percy used to beg him to make them for us any time he came over to our place to help Pop. And that was a lot.

“Oh, I missed you,” I mumble through a bite with what I’m sure is a longing look at the golden toasted bread and oozing cheddar cheese. “You can make these for me any day.”

He chuckles and picks up his spoon. “I’m glad I still have what it takes.”

“Was there any doubt?”

“I haven’t made them in a long time—”

“How could you not?” I lick my fingers and dunk my half-eaten sandwich into the steaming tomato soup. “This is the best comfort food. I always marveled at how you cooked from like, how old were you, ten?”

“Yeah, something like that.” He unwraps his sandwich and takes his first bite. “Kind of had to fend for myself once my father got into politics. Eddie looked after me when he was around, but that wasn’t much, and my parents…” He pauses to glance up at me with something weighty hanging in the air between us. “They were always out.”

I nod, remembering now how things were for him at home, then swallow the last of my soup. “This was really good. Thank you.”

“Glad you liked it.” He drags a napkin across his mouth. “Do I get a tour of your place?”

“Of course.” I push the chair back and stand. “Let’s clean up and then I’ll show you around.”

Oliver stands and Jordan lopes out from under the table. He tries to pick up the cat and Jordan hisses, backs up, and swishes his tail at him before leaving.

Laughing, I take the thermoses to the sink. "It's got to be on his terms."

"I can see that."

The animals follow us while I take him on a walk-through of my home. Finally, we end up in my bedroom.

"So this is Wren Tyler's bed." He sits on the end and pats the mattress as if checking for firmness.

I giggle and shake my head. "You say it like my bed is infamous."

"It might as well be for how many times I tried to visualize your home. Your room." He leans forward, elbows resting on his thighs, and blushes. "I'm going to sound like a stalker or something. You don't want to know how many times I drove by once I heard you'd moved out and gotten your own place."

A light fluttering sensation skitters through my chest. "You did?"

"Yeah. I wanted so badly to knock on your door. Say hi, ask to come in."

My mouth dries at his revelation, and I don't know how to respond or what to do with this new piece of information. All these years apart and we both wanted the same thing. To be together.

"I wish you had." The truth, simple but loaded with trouble if it had come to pass, flies from my mouth, too fast to stop.

He takes my hand and entwines our fingers. "Me too."

Oliver's warm, soft lips graze my knuckles while his gaze takes in everything around us, finally landing on the partially drawn curtains. "Do you have a balcony?"

"Uh-huh."

He springs to his feet and drags me to the door. "Let's see."

The latch is unlocked, door opened, and my sock-covered feet hit the cold deck before I can protest. I shiver. “Oliver, it’s chilly.”

“A little.” He drops my hand and heads back inside. “I’ll fix that.”

“What are you doing?”

I watch him gather pillows, the comforter, and additional blankets. He beams at me, his arms loaded with bedding.

My heart stops.

Everything around us fades away except the two of us. My ears fill with the steady pounding of my heart as I’m taken back to our childhood. To all the times Oliver and I trudged across my backyard with pillows, sleeping bags, and snacks to sleep in the treehouse Pop built for me. And of course, it became Percy’s as well once she came along.

In slow motion, as if we’ve traveled back in time, he pushes the loungers together and drapes the bedding across them. I can’t help but think we’re in the treehouse. Only, we aren’t.

“Wren, come here.” His voice is throaty and full of tenderness.

His arm shoots out, hand reaching for mine, and I don’t hesitate to go to him. He guides me onto the bedding and slides in next to me.

He wraps me in his arms and angles my head onto his chest and says, “I like it out here. It reminds me of the treehouse.”

“Me too.”

“Only thing is there’s no roof. Although it isn’t supposed to rain tonight so we should be good.”

“We’re going to sleep out here?” I lift my head and gaze through the glass sliding door into my bedroom. “It’s warmer in there and my bed is really comfy.”

He chuckles and slides down until we're almost face-to-face. "We practically spent every night of our summers sleeping outside in the treehouse."

"True. But we were also much younger and it was summer."

"Hey, Tyler, what happened to your sense of adventure?" His nose, a little chilled, nuzzles into the crook of my neck and causes me to shudder.

I scoff and pull back to look at him. "I know how to have fun and adventure with the best of them. If we're sleeping out here, let me go get changed..." I twist to get up but he holds me in place, not saying anything. "Hey, Twist, I need to put on my parka."

He barks out a laugh and clambers to his feet. His hands latch onto my waist and bring me with him. We amble inside to get ready for bed.

Once inside, he picks up the duffel bag he brought from beside my bed and pulls some clothes out of it. I'm more impressed with his forethought than worried about his intentions. This is Oliver.

After we dress in warmer clothes and brush our teeth, we venture back outside. It's darker and somewhat cooler, and the blankets where we once lay are now ice cold.

Oliver leaves the sliding door open a touch in case either the dog or cat want to brave the outside before slipping underneath the blanket beside me. My animals stare at us like we're fools from their oversized bed at the foot of mine.

"Thanks for agreeing to sleep outside." He kisses my cheek and slides an arm around my shoulders.

"I'm glad you're here and we're doing this. It's a beautiful night." I gaze up at the starry sky and it's all true.

I am thrilled to have Oliver in my house and neither rain nor snow would stop me from being out here on my balcony with him.

“It sure is.” He doesn’t look up. His gaze remains fixed on me, and I snuggle into him.

My hand lies flat on his tight abdomen, and I can’t help grinning every time he tenses and smirks with every twitch or stroke of my fingers. We lie like that for maybe five minutes before Oliver’s hand curls around my shoulder, thumb stroking a small patch of skin on my upper arm through my sweatshirt.

“Hey, Tyler, you still a night owl?”

“Uh-huh.” I glance up at him and his eyes are wide open, staring out into the dark. “You?”

“Yup.”

“Are you tired?” Even as I ask the question, his smile gives him away before he says a word.

“Nah.” He tilts his head back against the lounger. “You?”

“Nope.” Under the comforter and blankets, my fingers glide over the soft fabric of his pullover, and his stomach muscles bunch and flex at my roaming touch. “Whatever are we going to do to pass the time?”

“We could talk...” He says it in such a way that it sounds like the last thing he wants to do. “Or I could...” The hand not wrapped around my shoulders slides under the blankets, grazing my arm, then skimming over my middle, down, down to the edge of my sweatshirt where it comes to rest.

“Could what?” Voice a breathy whisper, I quiver as his fingers curl around the hem. The soft pads of his fingertips slip under and onto the hot, bare flesh of my stomach.

“Oh, you know.” Now he’s staring down at me, shifted slightly so that he towers above me. “Go down on you. Put my dirty mouth on your pretty pussy.”

A thrilling chill dances along my spine as the pads of Oliver’s calloused fingertips trail soft, sensual tendrils along the waistband of my leggings. One of his muscular thighs presses into my own, and now, almost every inch of his strong, taut side touches mine.

I forget how to breathe. He wants his mouth on me and I want it too. So desperately that the anticipation of it renders me speechless.

Hovering above me, he studies me intently. His warm, minty breath feathers across my cheek.

“Wren, I don’t have to if you don’t want me to.” The back of his free hand caresses my neck, expression serious—maybe even apprehensive. “The last thing I want is for you to think this, us, is only about sex. It isn’t.”

“Uh, what? No. I don’t think that.” I wrap a hand around his wrist to keep him close, troubled that he might pull back like his words suggest.

I lean my head toward his until our lips are a mere blink apart and pause.

Breathe, Wren, breathe.

“I want nothing more than for you to taste me.” My tongue darts out to flick at his upper lip. “To make me come.”

His dark lashes fall closed, and his head tips forward until our foreheads are touching. “Damn, Tyler, your mouth tastes so sweet.”

A giggle escapes my lips, and emboldened by how easily I have him hanging on my every word, my touch, my fingers unfurl from his wrist. I skate my hand down his tight stomach to the apex of his thighs to grope his bulge.

He is rock-hard. Oliver groans and curses under his breath, while I grip his remarkable length through his sweats.

“Fuck,” he grinds out as his hand dares to journey beneath my waistband, fingers dipping into my panties.

With the slightest brush of his fingers across my folds, I ignite. Hot, tingling sensations sweep across my stomach, growing hotter and gathering speed straight to my core.

“Oliver, please...your...mouth.” Mine latches onto his neck for a quick suck.

Then, lightning fast, Oliver flips back the covers, hands grasping the sides of the waistband of my leggings, and he pulls them off.

Chapter 4

Wren

The chilly night air slaps at my exposed skin and goose bumps erupt on my thighs, yet I'm not bothered with the cold. Oliver's face is between my thighs, one hand yanking my panties to my ankles, another traversing the length of my leg.

And then it's game on. Just a warm, wet swipe of his tongue against my clit reduces me to a greedy, single-minded nymph.

"Jesus. Twist," I cry out, fingers curling into Oliver's hair as my head tumbles back onto the lounger.

He pauses and I moan in displeasure, tugging on his short hair as I tilt my head to look down at him. He's looking up at me. A sexy, almost punishing smile dominates his face.

The sight of him between my thighs, his delicious lips slick and glistening with my arousal and only inches from my sex, nearly incinerates me.

"The name's Twist or Oliver. I generally don't go by Jesus."

Loud, rough laughter tears from my parted lips, and the fingers of one of his hands dig possessively into my pale thigh.

"Don't do this to me." My fingers tighten their hold on his hair, impatient and imploring.

"Do what?" He rises slightly, a slow hiss escaping his mouth when I don't let go of even a strand.

“Don’t play games. Don’t stop.” Lightly, I pull his hair and buck my hips in his direction. “I can go on but don’t want to. I’d rather have your mouth on me. You promised.”

I sound like a whiny, entitled brat and I can’t seem to care. He’s torturing me and I need it to stop. I need him.

As if sensing I’m on the brink of losing my patience, Oliver lowers himself toward my sex, lips seeking the inside of my thigh to plant a soft kiss. “That’s what I want to hear, and Wren, I never break a promise.”

My fingers finally release his hair, pussy throbbing as his tongue licks along my thigh, closer to where I ache for him.

“Your legs are fucking phenomenal.” His mouth moves to my other thigh, licking and kissing the burning flesh. “Spread them wider.”

Eager for him, I readily do so, legs parting as far as possible within the confines of the blankets. His gaze covets my pussy, pupils dark and simmering, while his hands anchor my legs apart.

“What is it with us and the dark?” He chuckles dryly. “I want to see you.”

I half laugh, half cry at how right he is. “This is another reason why the bed would’ve been better. Lights.”

“You want to go inside?” His sincerity is palpable, even as one of his big, skilled hands drifts under my sweatshirt, up my stomach and ribs to palm my breast.

Oliver would stop everything to move us inside if that’s what I wanted, but I no longer care about where we are or the temperature or anything else but this man. I’m not willing to wait a second longer.

Euphoria skitters through me, hips arching upward once more, and I sink my teeth into my bottom lip. “No. Please. Oliver, don’t make me wait any longer.”

Without another word, his lips are on my clit, and he alternates between sucking slow and gentle to hard and intensely demanding. My hips thrust into his face, legs trying

to thrash from side to side, but he holds me firmly in place. All the while, his lips, his tongue, the way he's devouring me bring me to the edge in no time.

He dips his tongue inside me, thrusting in and out, and my pulse skips a beat only to then skyrocket when he inserts not one but two fingers.

“God, Oliver.”

Mouth still on me, his tongue laves and sucks my clit until mesmerizing bright lights dance on the backs of my eyelids. My muscles spasm, core clenching, as I lose myself. It's like I'm melting into an inviting hot tub at the blinding heat curling low in my belly.

So attuned to my body, Oliver doesn't completely stop. He gently presses soft kisses on my pussy, then pulls the blankets over me and comes to lie next to me.

I roll into him and bury my face in his chest, my body molten lava. He smells so good, and it helps to ground me, piece me together into one solid state.

“Every inch of you tastes so good.” He kisses the top of my head. “I can't get enough.”

My hand wanders down his body to where he's still hard. I grab the elastic of his sweats, and before I can go any farther, Oliver stops me. “Uh-uh. Not tonight.”

“But—”

“No buts. I wanted to give this to you. Trust me, I got just as much out of it as you did.”

I snort and roll my eyes, loving the sentiment even if not convinced. “What if I said I wanted to?”

“Then I'd ask for a raincheck.” He drags my hand up to his chest. “Do you have any leftover pot pie?”

“What?” I pull up onto my elbow to stare at him, barely comprehending the quick jump from sex to food. “You're not hungry, are you?”

“I could eat.” He shrugs. “And I’ve been thinking about your homemade pot pie since the gym.”

“Well, I’ll have to make you one. Sorry, but the one from the other night is all gone.”

“Sounds good.” His lips brush my mouth before he pulls me back down onto his chest. “You sleepy now?”

“Not really, but I will be soon.” My finger traces a figure eight on his pullover. “Are you up for talking? Cuddling?” I laugh, still not quite believing Oliver’s by my side.

“I’m always up for cuddling with you. What do you want to talk about?”

“Why didn’t you become a teacher?” I tilt my head to look up at him. “That’s what you studied in college.”

“It is, but I don’t know. I intended to apply for teaching jobs, and then kind of fell into making custom furniture. It started out as a favor for a friend and went from there.”

“I didn’t know you could make things.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, I wasn’t so sure I could either. I love working with my hands, and Pop taught me a lot all those years of helping him build things. I figured I’d give it a try and that was that.”

“Do you think you’ll take Coach’s job now that he’s retiring?” I’m not sure why I’m asking when I’m pretty sure he wants to keep the Winslow Nest.

“I don’t think so. It’s something I can always fall back on. I want to keep the Nest.”

I bite my lip to keep me from bringing up Dot. She’s the only thing standing in his way and I’ll help him in any way I can, even though it feels more complicated than he’s letting on.

“And look at you and how you turned your love of books into a career.” He squeezes my hip. “Do you like being the town librarian?”

“Uh-huh. Love it, and I never realized there’s so much more I can do in this position.”

“Like what?”

My stomach flips in that giddy kind of way when you’re eager to share. “Since working at the library, I’ve always wanted to make the role more than just that, create programs and activities for the community. Fill a need and also bring us together like the book clubs, Sally’s yoga classes, the fundraisers. And now, I’m trying to launch a program, Bright Horizons, to help foster kids with college.”

He slides down so we’re face-to-face. “That’s cool. Tell me more about this Bright Horizons.”

“Do you remember that Serena dropped out of college?”

“Yeah.” He frowns, at first not following how my sister’s best friend fits into this.

“Do you remember why?”

“Um, something about not being able to afford it or, I’m not really sure, but I think it had to do with money.”

“Yes. It always bothered me when I heard how, even with a student loan that she only got approved for because of Reggie, that she still didn’t have enough support, financial and otherwise, to make a go of college.”

Slowly the details dawn on his face. Oliver remembers and this spurs me on.

“And since graduation, I started working with Reggie and I kind of fell into helping the foster kids with their college applications. Not all of them wanted college, most believing it wasn’t something they could have. But it got me thinking about how we could better support them, as a whole. The town. That’s how I got the idea for Bright Horizons.”

“How does it work?” His tone is keen and interested.

“In a nutshell, it’s designed to help foster kids from Reggie’s home, once they age out of the system and if they want to go to college. In addition to helping them with their school selection and applications, there would be a fund for

incidental expenses supported by the town and through fundraisers. A big part of the program is that willing families could sponsor a child during their two- or four-year college program. This is huge. The families would help them get set up for college with the basics for living on their own, in the dorm or off campus. Sponsorship works on a sliding scale, with families providing more in the first two years and decreasing amounts for subsequent years. In turn, for the student to continue to be eligible, they must maintain a certain grade point average and have a part-time job.”

“Wow. This is amazing, and you’ve brought this to life?”

“Almost. My proposal is with the city council, and I was told it’s just a formality for them to review and approve it. Everyone loves it...”

“What’s not to love? This is fantastic. So as soon as you hear from the city council, then what?”

“You make it sound like it’s a done deal.”

“There’s no way Mayor Malone is passing on this. I hate to say it like this, but it’ll make him look damn good to the governor.”

I yawn and cover my mouth. “I don’t care. If that’s what it takes to get the program approved, so be it.”

“You tired?”

“Yes, getting there.”

“I hope you know you’re amazing. You should be proud of yourself and your accomplishments.”

Blushing from his praise, I lightly kiss him and snuggle back into his arms. Eventually, we fall asleep, cocooned in blankets under the canopy of the big black night sky dotted with hundreds of stars, countless shining pinpoints, mapping out another world in all its mysterious beauty.

In the morning, we tumble out of our burrito-like wrap and sleepily go about brushing our teeth and getting ready.

I find Oliver in the kitchen as I traipse into the room in a simple green dress. He sidles up next to me, and I figure my

outfit meets with his approval by the way his hand lazily wanders under the hem of my dress. His fingers stray up the back of my thigh, casually stopping where my panties begin.

With the mug of coffee midway to my mouth, I inwardly command the deliciously pleased shiver that's gathering at the base of my spine to quit. "Uh, what exactly are you doing, Twist?"

I glance down over my shoulder, gaze sharpening on where his hand caresses the swell of my butt cheek under my dress. He lightly chuckles and squeezes the flesh before looking at me. His twinkling stare immediately heats me from the inside out.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"We don't have time for that." I mash my lips together to squash the needy whine in my voice. "I've got errands to run before I open the library, and you said you have a busy day too. Eddie, the Winslow Nest..."

I hand him his cup of tea and he smiles. "To be continued tonight." His hand appears from beneath my dress, and he leans in to kiss my cheek. "Thanks."

Sipping from a steaming mug, Oliver leans against the counter and examines me. He's wearing nothing but boxers, light brown hair thoroughly mussed. Of course, that's when my sister, Percy, prances into the room.

She stops short of the domestic sight in front of her, and never before have I regretted giving my family a key to my place.

True to Oliver's nature, he doesn't miss a beat nor care that he's in his skivvies. "Hey, Perce. How's it going?"

In contrast, I slide in front of him to cover all his flesh from her young impressionable eyes. She isn't all that young at twenty-one, but this feels wrong.

Her smile balloons with a snicker as she points at us. "You two. Together? Since when?"

I spin on my heel to face Oliver. “Why don’t you go get ready?” It’s meant to be a question but comes out more as a directive.

Like Percy, he cackles, clearly relishing in my discomfort. “I haven’t seen Perce in ages. I’d love to catch up.” He wraps an arm around my shoulder. “Yes. We’re together.”

He pauses to briefly look at me, and I instantly sense that I won’t like whatever comes out of his mouth next. “Since now. Well, since the gym.”

My sister frowns. “The gym?”

“Um, yeah, I forgot to mention Oliver was stuck with me in the gym.” I grab his half-full mug of tea and dump it in the sink.

“I wasn’t finished.” He pouts. “Why didn’t you tell Percy that I was in the gym with you?”

“Yeah, Wren, why didn’t you?” Percy now stands beside him, crowding my space.

My sister folds her arms across her chest. The way they playfully gang up on me has my stomach roiling.

I don’t want to get into this with Percy. I love my sister, but she knows way too much. She has had a front row seat to my crush on Oliver Winslow and will be relentless now that we’re together.

“I didn’t, uh, I didn’t...”

“Let me guess.” My bratty sister taps her lips with a finger as if deep in concentration.

“Fine. I didn’t want to have to explain things. This is new.” I motion to Oliver, as the heat of him, his firm, bare chest—all of him right there next to me—only adds to my fluster.

Satisfied with my response or because he senses I need this interrogation to be over, he gently kisses my temple. “I’m going to get ready and leave. It was great to see you, Percy.”

“Bye, Oliver.” She waves and watches him leave before swinging back to me. “He’s got a fine ass.”

“Shut up,” I hiss and grab her arm. “He does and I don’t need you telling me.”

“What else has he got that’s fine?”

I slap a hand over her mouth and scowl. “Percy Ann Tyler, that’s enough.” Unable to speak, she rolls her eyes and I drop my hand. “Anyway, why are you here?”

“I thought I didn’t need a reason to come over.”

“You don’t, but I saw you yesterday at the library. What’s up?”

“My car won’t start.” In unison, we both say, “Again.”

She nods and plays with the ends of her long, red hair. “Yeah. The car’s at Eddie’s and I need to go into Prospect. I thought you could drive me.”

“I’ve got errands before I go into work.”

“I’ll help you with your errands. Please.”

Reluctantly, I nod and grab my keys while quickly surveying the kitchen, making sure the dog and cat have water and I haven’t forgotten anything.

While Percy heads out to the car, I dash back into the bedroom and kiss Oliver goodbye. “Will I see you tonight? You’re more than welcome to stay here.”

“I’d like that.” He curls his hand around my hip.

“I was hoping you’d say that.” I hold up a key. “This is for you. To my house. Bye.” I give him one more peck and leave before I lose my will to walk away.

Once on the road to the next town over, Percy fidgets in her seat and I stiffen my spine, preparing for whatever it is she’s gearing up to say.

“Uh, Wren, sooo...you and Oliver?” Everything about her expression is suggestive. Her puckered lips, the sharp quirk of a brow, and her keen stare.

“Perce, we’re not having this conversation.”

“Why not? I know what goes on between a boy and a girl.”

I glance at her. “You mean a man and a woman.”

“Well, you’ve been crushing on him since he was just a boy. What’s the difference?”

I roll my eyes and press my lips together, hoping to stop the itch of a smile. She isn’t wrong.

“Wren, for what it’s worth, I think this is fantastic. And about damn time.”

A giggle erupts from me, and she follows though she’s also the first to stop. “I think it’s great about you and Oliver, and I will find out more about the gym.” She holds up a hand when I open my mouth. “Before you tell me it’s none of my business, if you won’t tell me, Oliver will.”

I scoff though she’s right. “Fine. Just not now. My brain’s too scattered.”

“Okay.” She glances out the window at the thick brush and trees lining the highway. “But just one question.”

“I feel like you already got your question. Fine, what?”

“Does Dot know?”

I keep my eyes fixed on the road, not wanting to see the concern in her gaze, and swallow thickly. Percy understands the significance of having anything to do with Dot Malone, and I dread the day she does find out.

Before I can say anything, my sister continues, “And has she come for you yet?”

“Not yet. We’ve talked about her. Oliver’s going to tell her about us today.”

“I hate to say it. Are you sure this is what you want? I know you’ve loved Oliver your whole life. But he was with her for a few years. They were engaged. Heck, I didn’t even know they had broken up.”

I want to tell her everything, explain how they ended years ago, but can’t. It wasn’t my relationship.

Percy shifts in her seat to face me, and I spare her a glimpse. Her usually happy face and twinkling green eyes

sober.

“Wren, when dealing with Dot, it doesn’t matter that Oliver says it’s over or that the two of you want to be together. The only thing that matters to that woman is what she wants. You better be careful.”

Chapter 5

Oliver

My chest aches, stagnant air burning my lungs, as I slide the truck into park and jump out in front of the Winslow Nest, my custom furniture business. Dot's car is here.

We own and work at the Nest together, even if I'm the talent behind the business. Today's the one day a week she works, if you can call it that. She more or less checks the payroll and invoices I complete and files them away. That's it.

I suppose I should be relieved to no longer have to waste my time looking for her, yet dread weighs me down. Her parents helped bring the Nest to life by loaning me the start-up money—all of which I've paid back. That's how her name wound up on the papers; it was one of Bill Malone's stipulations.

At the time, I foolishly didn't think much of it. All I cared about was being that much closer to making my dream a reality. Some might think that's why I was with Dot. It wasn't.

Though, my reasons were messed up. At the time, when I agreed to the terms of the contract, I figured her father was protecting his interests and his daughter. It made sense and seemed fair.

Besides, I always planned to pay off the loan as quickly as possible and remove Dot from the business. She claimed to have no problem with that and said she wasn't interested in the business. Boy, how things changed.

She never did relinquish her title as co-owner, and I'm not blameless. Partly because my lazy ass never got around to it and partly because of my blind trust that when the time came, Dot would willingly sign away her rights to the Winslow Nest.

That's not how things went down.

Trepidation shadows my every step toward the entrance. Not too long after we got together, every once in a while, Dot would let her façade slip and I'd see beneath the glossy blonde hair, over-the-top smile, and big, shiny anime-like eyes to the malevolence lurking within.

As I near the door to the large, rustic shed-like structure, more a workshop and small office than a store, my phone pings with a text. It's Wren, most likely in Prospect or on her way back.

Wren: I forgot that I'll be home late tonight. Yoga at the library. Help yourself to whatever's in the fridge. xo

Home.

We haven't had the talk about living arrangements, yet after one night together, she's already calling her place *my* home.

Dot has the house I built, and I won't take it from her. It was never my dream home, more an opportunity to hone my skills as a carpenter. It's one less thing to fight over by giving it to Dot. And until Wren, I wasn't worried about where I'd live since I was leaving town, but that's all changed.

Now that I'm staying, I will have to find a place of my own. I have a few options. Eddie, my older brother, and then there's this place. The Nest has a small loft, big enough for a double bed and maybe a chest of drawers. That is if Dot doesn't kick up a fuss.

My thumbs hover over the phone screen and I contemplate my reply. Something sexy and funny—I love to make Wren laugh. The memory of the melodic twinkle of her joy flits through me, filling me completely. She laughed a lot last night. We both did.

Last night. Wow. It was unbelievable and all I ever wanted. I could easily get used to living with her, spending every spare minute with her.

Are we moving too fast? I don't think so, but I've also spent most of my life wanting to be with her.

I meant what I said last night. I plan to marry her.

I quickly type out a response, **If you're doing yoga, can I watch?** then drop my phone into my back pocket.

At that same moment, Dot pokes her head out the door. "What are you doing here? I thought you left town." Her tone is sweeter than honey, and immediately, the hairs on the back of my neck prickle as she smiles and holds the door open for me.

"The Nest is mine. I'm not going anywhere." I deliver the news in a deliberately neutral voice, not wanting to incite her just yet. That will come once she hears what else I have to say.

She grabs my arm and leans in as if we're a loving couple. "You're staying? Does this mean you've finally come to your senses?"

My senses? To her, that means the wedding is back on. No fucking way. I pull from her grasp and look down. She's only five feet four but might as well be ten feet tall for how she acts.

Dot frowns, foot tapping furiously, clearly impatient though that could all change once I say more.

"If you mean come to my senses by not walking away from my business, then yes." I riffle through the stack of mail on the desk. "I also wanted to talk to you about something else. While we're over and I don't owe you updates on my personal life,"—I rest the pile of envelopes on the desk and look at her—"out of respect for you, I wanted you to know I'm with Wren Tyler."

Her forbidding gaze narrows. "No. Over my dead body."

I snort at her childish response. "Dot, you've no say in this. What we do need to talk about is the Nest."

“How long has this been going on? Were you with Wren the past few days?”

I bristle at her utterance of the name of the woman I love and hope she didn't notice. Luckily, she's so caught up in her mission to make my life a living hell that she remains silent but menacing as she follows me to the long workbench.

I peruse the outstanding work orders and try to plan my day. She steps closer, perfume cloying. “Don't you have anything to say?”

Eyes still on the paperwork, I clench my jaw at how much she sounds like a disapproving mother. Always does when it comes to interactions with me. I don't know why she won't let this go, let me go.

I release an exasperated breath and look at her. “I don't owe you an explanation.”

“Dammit, Oliver, answer me.”

“Dot, if you aren't going to talk about the Nest, we'll let our lawyers figure it out.” Going the legal route isn't my preference, and with any luck, if my plan works, things won't need to go that far.

I saunter over to my tools and pull out the smoothing plane to work on my latest project. “Goodbye.”

She flinches at the finality of us though quickly rallies, spine straightening and nostrils flaring. “I'm not going anywhere.”

With safety glasses now in place, I start to smooth the grain of the dining table I'm currently working on. Never content to be ignored, she closes the distance, all the while spewing comments like they are facts or commands. Dot's an erupting volcano, and I've nowhere to run for cover.

“We are not over. Come home.” She shoves my arm and I drop the tool.

“Dammit, Dot, what more do you want from me? I gave you two freaking years to end this nightmare of a relationship

the way you wanted. I left it up to you and that wasn't enough. Let us end this and get on with our lives. The Nest is mine."

"It's as much mine as it is yours."

I rub at the back of my neck where a leaded tension builds, overbearing and unwieldy, but I'm not backing down this time. "And without me, what are you going to do with it?"

"Daddy will come after you for doing this to me." Here we go. I wondered how long it would take her to bring her father into this.

"We ended a long time ago and should have severed ties then. Kendall Davies—she's my lawyer—will send you the papers. I'm buying you out."

"No. We're getting married. We belong together."

My stomach turns at my stupidity for ever getting involved with Dot Malone. What the hell was I thinking?

"Oliver, why are you doing this?" Tears streak her face and she wipes at them with the back of her hand. "Give me one more chance."

Her fingers curl around the fist at my side, and though I don't like to see anyone in anguish, Dot's a master manipulator.

"Why her of all the women in this town? Why Wren?"

"This has nothing to do with Wren. Leave her out of this. We were done before we even began. We were a mistake."

She bristles at my words and I soften my tone, not wanting to hurt her or wake the beast, only wanting to get through to her. "This doesn't have to hurt any more than it already is. We've dragged out our breakup for too long. It's over."

"We aren't over," she screams, and so her rampage begins.

This is how she gets. Out of control like a child having a tantrum because they haven't gotten their way. Except, she's more colorful.

Expletives fly from her mouth along with spittle. "Fuck you. Like I'd ever let you get the Nest, asshole." Hands

clenched into fists, she flings her arms in the air and her hair whips around her face. “I’ll make you pay. Burn this fucking place to the ground before I let you get it.”

Threat after threat comes at me. Most I’ve heard before.

The last time we talked about the Nest and ending things once and for all, she threatened me with something her father said recently at a family barbecue. Drunk and frustrated at Dot, who was once again whining to her daddy about something to do with me, the mayor said aloud that perhaps he should suggest a name change for the town.

While it was mostly his ego talking, my blood froze. Winslow Grove was founded by my ancestors. Our family legacy. To hear him so casually suggest ending that, it shook me to the core. If my father were here today, he’d be furious and disappointed in me if I let that happen.

Unfortunately, Dot sensed my panic, and when I pushed her to sign over the business and tell everyone we were never getting married, she promised to nudge her father on his suggestion. If anyone can persuade Mayor Malone to do something, it’s his only daughter.

Her threat prompted me to plan to leave town. I could never live with myself if Winslow Grove ceased to exist. Walking away seemed like the best idea. If I acted like I didn’t care about the name or the town, she’d lose her leverage. I’m confident that it would’ve worked, but everything’s changed. I’m staying and have dragged Wren, unknowingly, into this.

Wren doesn’t know about a lot of this, only that Dot wouldn’t easily give me the business. It isn’t because I don’t want her to know; it’s because I couldn’t tell her. Not yet. The timing hadn’t been right. Not when last night she had reservations about us. Her confidence in me and our future wavered, and that nearly killed me.

The sharp jangling of the glass pane as Dot slams the front door snaps me out of my reverie. At last, the place is still and quiet though it does nothing to settle my racing heart and churning gut.

I've got to get Dot out of the picture. Too rattled to work, I pull out my phone and check my personal email, one Dot doesn't have access to, and the email I've been anxiously waiting for sits at the top of the list of unread.

A company based in the Netherlands, Mercury Boetiek Incorporated, wants me to furnish their new office space in Amsterdam. This is a huge opportunity to expand my business, though interestingly enough, they reached out to me directly, not the Nest. That's what gave me the idea to keep things separate from the business and private from Dot.

While this job comes with challenges, it would give me the money to buy out Dot. Without this deal, I'd have to take out another loan to get rid of her. It also opens up international sales which doesn't violate the noncompete we both signed regarding the Nest.

I type out a quick reply, and the boost of hope makes the morning fly by quickly. At a little after noon, I head into town for lunch. Normally, I'd stick to the Big Sky Café, but today, I wind up at Pop's Grill.

Luke Tyler, Wren's father and more affectionately known as Pop, places two plates stacked high with BLTs and fries in front of customers at the counter. His head, full of wavy, gray hair, pops up, blue eyes landing on me as I saunter into the restaurant.

My feet suddenly feel heavy and clunky like bricks. I stumble to a halt and can't stop staring at the man I once considered to be more of a father to me than my own. Mouthwatering aromas of smoked meat and baked bread hit my nostrils and fill me with an undeniable nostalgia for home and how things once were.

Familiarity bowls me over, and it takes me a minute to get my bearings. I tear my gaze from Pop. The place looks the same yet different. Leather booths still fan the perimeter of the room, a sprinkling of tables in the middle, and a long row of stools line the counter just outside the kitchen. There's that same warm glow from the recessed lights and soft music playing in the background.

How long has it been since I was last here?

Too long.

Pop waves a hand around the room dismissively. “Sit wherever you want.”

He disappears into the kitchen without so much as a “Hello” or “Get the hell out” or “It’s about time.”

His indifference stings and yet, I deserve it. In high school, when things got weird between Wren and me, or more like, she put walls and distance between us, we still had this place and, of course, Pop.

My summers were spent at the Grill, working, and outside of that, any chance I could get away from my parents, I’d be with Pop and his family. Wren and I didn’t hang out but we existed in the same space, and I desperately clung to that, even not understanding why we’d grown apart.

All that changed after college.

She came home and avoided me, would literally escape whenever she saw me. I understand now that Kellen, my once best friend, deliberately fed her lies and drove a wedge between us. At the time, I was at a complete and utter loss as to how to fix things. To get her back. I missed my best friend.

That’s when I began consciously steering clear of the places and people we shared. Pop was *her* father, and the Grill *her* family business. I was no longer welcomed and it felt like I no longer belonged.

I slide into a booth overlooking the parking lot, Main Street, and just beyond that, the entrance to the library. A great vantage point to spot Wren if she leaves for lunch or on an errand.

She isn’t why I’m here. It’s high time I bridge the gap with Pop.

The man in question eventually lopes toward me like a dead man walking. I might be imagining things, but I figure he’d rather be anywhere but on his way to talk to me.

For several minutes, I've watched him cater to tables that came in after me. At one point, it looked like he would pawn me off on his only other server, and that would've cut deep. Although, given the grim slash of his lips, the deep frown lines, and narrowed eyes, I'm not so sure this is a good idea. Perhaps the other server wouldn't be such a bad thing.

"Oliver." Across from me, Pop leans against the end of the banquette. "What'll it be?"

My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth, unsure how to act or what to say in the face of his all-business demeanor. It's like we're strangers.

"Uh, hey, Pop. It's good to see you." I flip my menu closed though I never needed it in the first place. I've always gotten the same thing. "How are you?"

"Fine." He hooks a finger in one of the belt loops of his blue jeans. "You know what you want?"

My back pushes into the leather of the bench, seeking a relaxed pose although I'm anything but. "Look, Pop, I know it's been a long time and I wanted to put the past behind us."

He crosses his toned, well-tatted forearms across his still solid chest. "Wish I could. I've no idea what happened. I thought I raised you better than to disappear without so much as a goodbye or a fuck you."

Chapter 6

Oliver

My heart pangs at how, like me, Pop believes in the influence he had on me growing up. This man was critical, if not *the* most important adult in my life. I may have had two upstanding parents, people I tried badly to please and make proud, but Pop raised me.

“After college, Wren and I didn’t hang out anymore. I don’t really know how we got there—”

He cuts me off with a brusque clearing of the throat. “I don’t give a damn what was going on with my daughter.” His finger motions from him to me. “We weren’t part of that.”

Though he tries to hide it, hurt and disappointment wade in his harsh tone and pinched features. Despite all the estranged years, I still know him. I can see and feel how my negligence let him down.

“Aw, shit, Pop. I fucked up.” I blow out a breath and scrape a hand over my head. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have let whatever was going on with Wren get in the way of what we had. I just didn’t want to upset her. I’m sorry.”

I stare up at him, hoping he’ll accept my apology. I’ll tell him about Wren and that we’re together at a later date. For now, I only want to make things right with him.

He rubs his scruffy chin, staring down at me, and what I’d give to know what’s going on in his head. But I don’t get to find out when Percy sidles up to her father.

“Oliver. Twice in one day.” She rests her cheek briefly on her father’s bicep, grinning down at me. “First at Wren’s and now the Grill. Wow. It’s almost like you’re coming back into our lives.”

“Hey lovebug.” Pop plants a kiss on the crown of her head. “Wren take you to Prospect?”

“Uh-huh, and Eddie just texted. My car should be ready in a couple of hours.”

“Good. What’s this about Oliver at Wren’s?” Pop doesn’t even glance at me, only peering down at Percy.

“Wren and Oliver are together.” Like a mouse playing with her dinner, Percy smirks, tickled pink to be giving her dad the news.

His eyebrows shoot to his silver hairline. “Together?”

In unison, Percy and I say, “Yes.”

I open my mouth to explain when a blast of cold air ushers Dot Malone to my table. What the hell is she doing here?

“Oliver, sweetie, you’re here.” My ex leans down to peck my cheek, and her perfumy blonde hair smacks me in the face.

When she stands, her hand rests on my shoulder. “Pop. Percy. Hi.”

“Dot.” Percy puckers her lips after spitting her name as if she’s tasted something sour.

Pop nods, nothing more. Both silently watch, eyes flitting between my ex-fiancée and me like we’re some puzzle to solve. I anxiously search for the most tactful way to get Dot to leave without it leading to a scene.

“Honey, I was going to wait to share this until we were alone, but I simply can’t.” Dot half jumps, half skips on the spot. “I’m bursting to tell you.” Her voice climbs higher, getting louder, with each word. “Tell everyone.”

The near two dozen or so people in the Grill—it is lunchtime—all turn to face the four of us. A burgeoning,

thorny knot of alarm forms in my chest and causes my heart to beat out a tune of doom. What the hell is Dot playing at?

Is this it? She's finally ending things like I've been asking her to do for years? Did our run-in at the Nest finally make her see that we're over? Or was it the news that I'm moving on with Wren?

While a public announcement wasn't what I had in mind, I'm only grateful that this day has finally come. I don't even care if she makes me look like a total jerk. Sure, my deceased parents would roll over in their graves—we have to keep the Winslow name as a shining example of all things good and right. It's a small price to pay to be done with this.

“Dot, what are you—”

Something feral and urgent darts across her manic expression, and she cuts me off. “I am pregnant.”

Dot claps her hands in glee, snuffles, and wipes at a nonexistent tear before saying those three words again. This time, she's louder and more certain.

Percy inhales sharply, two women at the next table offer jubilant congratulations, and a few more people put their hands together at the happy news.

Shocked and slow to follow, I don't fully comprehend why all eyes are on me. I'm not the father. Still, it isn't until two men from the city council, one after the other, clap me on the back and hug Dot, that everything clicks into place. All the pieces meld together like a cruel punch to the face.

Shit. Everyone thinks the baby is mine.

And why wouldn't they? They believe we are still engaged. *Fuck me.*

Gazes dark and pointed, Pop's and Percy's eyes are glued to me. Only moments before we were talking about how I was with Wren. Finally. I need to say something, set things straight. If I do it here, in public, who knows what Dot will do? She's dangerous when cornered or called out. More so than usual.

Standing from the booth, I nudge Dot out of the way but not too far. “Dot, can I have a word with you?”

My fingers wrap around her arm and she stops talking to Mrs. Parker. “Just one moment.”

Pop clears his throat again and leans into me, lowering his voice. “We’re not done here.” His eyes slide briefly to my ex. “Tomorrow. My house at three.”

He doesn’t wait for my response, spinning on his heel and marching away like a man ready for combat. The muscles in my face pulse, jaw hinged so tight. What is Dot playing at?

Percy, cheeks red and eyes clouded with doubt—or worse, betrayal and rage—sneers at me and then rushes from the restaurant.

Dammit. I tug on Dot’s arm and she quickly wraps up her conversation. As we exit the Grill, several people try to stop us to give us their well wishes, and like a complete fool, I only nod and strain a smile.

It’s only when we’re several feet from the restaurant, well on our way to the Nest, that I start talking. “What the hell, Dot?”

“What?” She tucks her hair behind an ear and stares ahead.

“Publicly announcing you’re pregnant. People think it’s mine.”

She stops in the middle of the sidewalk, gawking at me like I’ve lost my marbles. The Nest is within sight, and now I wish I’d pressed her harder earlier, or given her the audience she so clearly needs.

“Oliver, what are you talking about? Of course you’re the father. Didn’t I always say we’d be a happy family?”

She’s lost her mind, or more like wants to mess with my head.

“Fuck, no. We’re not doing this.” My bellow startles her and me.

Wide-eyed and mouth open, Dot charges for the Nest with me on her heels. She's not getting away with this, not by a long shot.

I'm the one to usually keep my cool no matter how bad things get. It's the way I was raised, to rein it in so as not to bring harm to the Winslow name. I hated how my father would overlook the worst of things just to save face. As I've aged, I realize it's a useful tool to be levelheaded, but I can't say so right now. My restraint lies shredded back at the Grill.

Once inside, I whirl her to face me. "What the hell is going on here? We haven't had sex in more than two years."

She grimaces and casts her eyes downward. "Oliver, with a baby on the way, we need to stop this and just get married."

I grapple to find the words to cut through her garbage. This woman is devious, and clearly, she thinks this will keep us together, but why does she carry on with it when it's just us?

"We're never getting married, no matter what. The baby isn't fucking mine." I bite my tongue to stop from adding "if there even is a baby."

I wouldn't put it past her to lie about this. There isn't much Dot wouldn't do to get her way. To her, life is a game, and sadly, she must win at all costs.

She crosses her arms and looks at me, defiance burning bright in her gaze.

I place my hands on my hips to prevent them from fisting and glare back. "I don't care who the father is. You need to tell people it's not me. Fix this baby-daddy mess or I will."

"No. If you say one word to the contrary, I'll take the Nest away from you."

I scoff, fully prepared for the battle. "And I'll do what I have to. I'm not letting you get away with this lie."

A darkness settles over her features; she's never looked more sinister. "I'll get my father to change the name of the town."

Her threat causes me to break out in a sweat, but I keep my expression flat and shrug, not wanting her to see how her threat alarms me. I must fail given her current smile.

“Ha. Like you don’t care.” She smugly smirks. “You know, Daddy would love nothing more than to have another feather in his cap. Think of all the powerful people he’d have to get in front of, how this would be just one more thing he’s done to better this town and our great state.”

Dot circles me like a shark, and I still, summoning everything within me to keep from telling her where to go.

She leans in, pushing up on her toes to get closer to my ear. “He wants to do it. You and I both know he does. Would love nothing more, and all he needs is a little push. And you know me.” She drops back onto her heels, hand pressing into the center of her chest as she bats her eyelashes. “I’d love nothing more than to oblige. One word from me and Winslow Grove would be a thing of the past.”

The snap of her fingers elicits a sharp inhale from me.

Behind her, my older brother, Eddie, waltzes in. “Dot. Oliver.”

Even with his silver beard, I can tell by the pinched lines around his eyes and thinning lips that he’s pissed.

“Oh, hi, Eddie.” Dot’s sweet-as-sugar tone grates on my nerves. “Did you hear our news?”

“I heard.” He doesn’t spare her a glance, pointed gaze stabbing me. “Dot, you should leave.”

“What?” She halts midfluff to her hair and glowers at him, all pretenses forgotten. “Aren’t you going to congratulate us?”

“Dot.” Like throwing a knife, her name slices through the air in warning. I may have kept my mouth shut in town, but I won’t lie to my brother. “Don’t even go there.”

Eddie brushes past her like she’s already gone. Her eyes narrow into thin slits resembling a knife blade aimed at his back. No one tells Dot what to do.

“Leave and stop spreading lies about the baby. It isn’t mine.”

Her cutting glare lands on me. Instantly, her neck breaks out in fire-red splotches and her cheeks flame. Eddie’s eyes widen, glancing from me to her. He pauses on Dot, and while I can’t see the look he gives her, she nods, presses her lips together, and hustles toward the door.

In a clipped tone, she mutters something resembling goodbye. She’s no sooner gone than Eddie spins back to me.

“What the fuck, Oliver? I thought you were done with her, then I walk into Big Sky for a coffee and everyone’s gums are flapping with news about you and Dot having a baby.” He cocks his head to one side. “It isn’t yours. Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I slam my fist onto the workbench, immediately regretting the outburst.

“Then why is she—”

“Dot lied. She deliberately put me on the spot and announced it in town, banking on me saying nothing in front of anyone.”

“Oliver, you gotta stop this bullshit.”

“I’m going to, but she just threatened the town name change again. Said she’ll push Malone to do it, and we both know she can and he will.”

“Let him.” Eddie shrugs, but I’m pretty sure his nonchalance is all an act. He’s a Winslow too, and it’s his legacy as much as it is mine.

“Right. And you wouldn’t give a damn if this town was called Hauser or Autumnvale or, better yet, Malone?”

He shoves his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. “The mayor can’t unilaterally change the name. We’d call for a town hall, a vote. We could try to stop it.”

“We both know once the horse is out of the barn, there’s no going back. I don’t want to let things get to that, and just think what Dad would say.”

“Don’t give a fuck what he’d say and don’t you give me that garbage about Merrick.” He has always called our father by his first name, refusing to acknowledge him as Dad or in any other familial way. “He’s no longer here. You don’t have to live for him, and that sanctimonious prick sure as fuck doesn’t deserve your loyalty or respect.”

Even though I had a difficult relationship with my father—as his son, he was a hard man to please—Eddie and Dad never got along. Merrick Winslow lost Audrey, his first wife and Eddie’s mother, to a sudden heart attack when Eddie was twenty. Less than a year later, he married my mother, Diana.

“I’m not living for him, and stop talking about him like that. Sure, he wasn’t perfect. Neither of us could ever live up to his exacting standards, but he was our father.”

We glare at each other, neither of us backing down until I do, trying to appeal to him with the one connection we have. Blood. Our name. This town.

“Eddie, come on. I happen to like the Winslow name. I don’t want the town name to change. I love this place. I love the history.”

He avoids my gaze and remains silent. My earliest memory of Eddie and our father is of them arguing. I can’t remember a time when they weren’t at odds.

A year after I returned from college, my parents died in a car crash on their way back from Missoula. At the time of his death, Eddie wasn’t speaking to Dad.

Fortunately, their problems never tainted my relationship with my big brother. Eddie loves me, taught me a lot, and was always there for me. Between Eddie and Pop, I had the guidance, love, and support that my father had a hard time bestowing.

But strangely, despite the disapproval he easily heaped onto his sons, I tried endlessly to please him, to live by his rules and credos. His biggest belief was to protect the Winslow name and legacy at all costs.

Merrick Winslow would hate all of this.

“Okay, enough about that.” Eddie nears me and hooks a hand around my neck with a rough squeeze. “Where did you stay last night? I wondered if you’d changed your mind and skipped town.”

“I was at Wren’s.”

“Tyler?” he asks as if there’s another Wren in town.

I chuckle and feel my cheeks heat at the admission. “Yeah.”

“You two?”

“Yeah.” A smile tugs at my lips.

Suddenly, the memory of Pop’s command to talk to me tomorrow and then Percy hightailing it out of the Grill after Dot’s announcement smarts like a kick to the shin. Wren.

I wince, dread seeping into my bones. “Shit, Eddie, I’ve gotta go.”

Wren doesn’t know about Dot’s news. Percy most probably ran straight to the library. I should be the one to tell her. But what if I’m too late?

Chapter 7

Wren

“**P**retty bird, listen to me.” Reggie places her hand on top of mine and squeezes reassuringly. “You’ve done an amazing thing here, and the city council sees that. There’s no way in hell they’ll reject your proposal.”

The conviction in her voice causes a warmth to spread through my chest, but it isn’t enough to stop the doubts from mushrooming in my mind.

“I hope you’re right.” I bite my bottom lip as if it were that easy to crush the worry. “The waiting is torture. And now that Mayor Malone has postponed our meeting...” Apprehension ricochets through me, making my shaking head speed up. “It doesn’t feel good.”

Movement from outside the library entrance snags my attention. A tip of a shoe and a flash of blue. Although the longer I stare out the window, no one appears. Only a shadow is visible. Strange.

“It means nothing. Bureaucratic red tape.” Reggie tuts dismissively at my concern and slips a graying strand of hair that somehow fell from her ponytail behind her ear. “There’s no way Malone will pass up the opportunity to make Winslow Grove a shining example of a community helping their own.”

She rolls her eyes as if imagining the spectacle the mayor will make. “Trust me, he’ll gleefully boast about this program to the other towns. Although, I hope you know this also means he’ll take credit for the idea. Especially when it’s a great success and other towns want to create their own.”

An unattractive snort bursts from me. “I don’t care if he takes credit. My only concern is the kids. I don’t want Jack, Brayden, and Courtney to be overlooked. To miss out on college and a chance to have a better future.”

While I’m blessed with a loving father and home, I know what it’s like to miss out or be overlooked. When my mother died, a lot of the day-to-day responsibilities fell to me as the oldest. Some of it I willingly accepted. I looked at it as a way to stay connected to my mom. I missed her so much and wanted her to be proud of me. And some of it was thrust upon me by Pop.

To this day, I don’t think he fully realizes the heavy burden he placed upon me or how I missed out on things and felt overlooked. At seven years old and without a mom, I had to grow up quickly. Goofing off or acting out over something silly or childish was no longer acceptable.

Almost overnight, I was taking care of my three-year-old sister, tending to the house, and helping out at the Grill. Pop was grieving and overwhelmed and probably didn’t realize what he was doing. Nonetheless, it left me hollowed out and was likely why I retreated so quickly and so far when I thought Oliver liked someone else, our friendship be damned. It also heightened my need to help those who are overlooked or might miss out because of their circumstance.

Reggie pats my hand, bringing me back to our conversation. Her expression is tender and intense. “Neither do I. Little bird, what you’re doing is changing their lives. When I think about the kids I’ve had before Court, Jack, and Bray...” She presses her lips together and glances over to the three in question.

They’re walking toward us, with Courtney leading the way. “Bye, Ms. Tyler. See you later, Reggie.” She opens the door as Jack and Brayden echo her goodbyes.

We wave goodbye and Reggie looks after them, expression wistful. “All I have to say is those kids will have a chance thanks to you and the sponsoring families. Even if one of them is Lara Crandall.”

She makes a face and we both laugh. Childless and well off, the Crandalls jumped at the opportunity to sponsor Jack—he was randomly assigned to them. Lara may be difficult, but she came through. For that, I will be eternally grateful.

The front door to the library swings open and Percy surges in, bringing a blast of cool autumn air. She's in black boots, jeans, and her blue jacket. Was she the one pacing outside?

“Wren.” She sprints toward me. “I need to talk to you. Now.”

Eyes wild, cheeks red from the wind, she doesn't even acknowledge Reggie. Something is wrong.

I step from behind the counter, heartbeat picking up pace. “Is everything okay?”

Reggie frowns and reaches for my sister's shoulder. “Honey, what is it?”

“I'm fine.” She brushes her tousled red hair from her face, gaze never wavering from me. Her light blue eyes implore me. “We need to talk. Uh, Reggie, sorry, but alone.”

“It's okay, honey.” Reggie pats her shoulder and glances my way, a tight smile firmly in place. “I'll talk to you later, Wren.”

“Yes. Bye, Reggie. Perce, you're worrying me. What is going on?”

“Let's go into the kitchen. Or maybe upstairs to the media room.” She casts a glance to the staircase, then hesitates, chest heaving. Then she scans the ground floor fervently. “Are we alone?”

“Yes.” I grip her arm to hold her in place. “Please start talking. You're scaring me. Is Pop okay?”

When Percy graduated from college this past summer, finishing her degree in only three years, she declared her interest in eventually running the Grill. Our father was thrilled to hear that she wanted to take over the family business. Since then, she has been working her way through all the positions and learning from him.

If something has happened to Pop, she'd know. They work side by side every day. My chest squeezes and I struggle to breathe. Not Pop...

"No. He's fine. It's...I-I-I..." At a loss for words, her gaze drops to the countertop and she's suddenly enthralled with the wooden grain.

I grasp both her arms, tone stern. "Percy, talk to me."

"Wren, I don't know how to tell you this..." She pinches her lips together for a beat. "But you have a right to know." A lone tear spills from the corner of her eye as she forces herself to look at me. "Dot's pregnant."

"Pregnant? Okay." A sick feeling unfurls low in my stomach even as I struggle to make sense of this news. "And why is this important to me?"

My sister licks her quivering lips. "Oliver's the father."

My knees weaken. "What?"

Like a dam bursting, she gushes, unburdening every second of Oliver's visit to the Grill. First, how he talked to Pop and Percy, then Dot's very public announcement, almost as if she was putting on a show.

She barely takes a breath, and with each new detail, my stomach unravels, spinning to the point of nausea. This can't be true.

"And what did Oliver say?" That's all I care about.

"He didn't say anything. Only that he wanted to talk to Dot alone."

My blood runs cold. This can't be right. Oliver said he was done with Dot, had been for years.

And why is my sister telling me this and not Oliver? Once again, I'm left wondering where the hell he is.

"He must have said more." My insistence smacks against her shaking head.

"No. He left with Dot." Her blue eyes burn with indignation, and despair blankets her voice. "The baby's his."

Her voice cracks as does my heart.

Percy has always loved Oliver and looked up to him like a big brother. And no matter how I tried to keep my feelings for him under wraps all these years, she's no fool.

But this... It's a betrayal that I'm guessing she isn't willing to let slide. I can see it in the way her complexion reddens and in the anguish marring her usually serene features.

I too feel this supposed betrayal, deep and searing, in my bones. I don't want to believe it, and yet, where is Oliver? Why hasn't he spoken to me?

I pull my phone from my purse in case I've missed a call or text. There's nothing from him.

He told me he hasn't been with Dot in two years. The baby can't be his...

But if so, why isn't he here? Why haven't I gotten a word from him since then? He had to figure I'd hear.

My question from last night taunts me. My gut told me it didn't make sense. Two years is a heck of a long time. Still, Oliver wouldn't lie to me. Was he ashamed to tell me they weren't over? What if they were only on a—what do some couples call it—a break?

It would explain why they were still having sex.

Bile rushes up the back of my throat, and I clamp my hand over my lips to stop it from flying from my mouth.

The what-ifs run rampant in my head. Even if they were over, a couple of years is still a long time to be in close quarters. They used to be intimate. It isn't hard to believe they still were, sometimes—that he may have slipped.

While I don't like it, I get it. And he certainly didn't do anything wrong. We weren't together. But why would he lie about it? If they were sleeping together, this is a recent occurrence because Dot's now pregnant.

“Say something.” Percy rattles me by the arms.

“I don't know what to say. I need to talk to Oliver.”

“You haven’t heard from him?” Her incredulity only worsens the sickening feeling spreading through my body.

I shake my head and press my lips together, afraid a sob may leak out instead of words.

She narrows her eyes. “If I didn’t see it with my own eyes, there’s no way I’d believe Oliver could do something like this, especially to you.” She adds, in a small voice, as if to herself, “I thought he was a good guy.”

“Hey, don’t say that. We haven’t heard his side of things. Did Dot actually say it was his.” It’s hard to persuade her to reserve judgement when I’m struggling to do the same. And it makes it even harder since I haven’t heard from him.

“She didn’t say it wasn’t Oliver’s. You should’ve seen her. Basking in the well wishes from everyone in the restaurant. She sure was in her element.”

I close my eyes, trying to shut out the image though it’s futile. I can see it now. Dot hanging all over Oliver, rubbing her stomach and smiling. All of it burns my retinas.

Percy cuts through the sickening vision. “I hate to say this, but I told you so. Dot isn’t a nice person, no matter how hard she tries to make the town believe otherwise. Now with a baby on the way, and if she knows about you and Oliver, she’ll come after you.”

We stare at each other, and my mind reels with how right my sister is. I’m a threat to Dot, even if this baby news is the end of Oliver and me. I’m not so sure I can trust him if he lied. It’s bad enough that he was with Dorothy Malone for years. And if the baby is his, where do I fit in?

I hate even thinking that way. Oliver’s wanted to be a father for as long as I can remember. I won’t stand in his way. There’s no way he’d turn his back on his child; he’s a good man. He will want to do the right thing—give marriage and a family with Dot a shot.

That right there kills me. Oliver and I never stood a chance. How silly I was to think we could have a future

together. Maybe the universe knew all along that we were never meant to be, no matter how we felt about each other.

God, this hurts.

My teeth sink into my bottom lip to stifle a whimper, and Percy takes my hand. “What are you going to do?”

Just then, Mrs. Ada Parker shuffles into the library with her cane. “Good afternoon, ladies.”

She’s all smiles as Percy swivels to face her. We both say hellos, and before I can ask how I may help, she lifts her cane at me. “Wren, did you get the baking book I asked for?”

As the only Parker left to run Beyond the Cake, the town bakery and her family-owned business, she works tirelessly to keep her dessert offerings fresh and unforgettable. Mrs. Parker is always in here, taking out the latest baking books or searching the Internet for the best desserts. I can hardly imagine where she gets the energy at her nearly seventy-five years of age.

“No, sorry, Mrs. Parker, it isn’t in yet.” I shove my trembling hands into my dress pockets and plaster a small smile onto my face. “I should have it early next week. The shipment was delayed.”

She harumphs and lumbers toward the row of computers. “All right, then. I’ll just be over here looking at the Googly whatchamacallit.”

Percy turns around to face me, her eyes somewhat twinkling with amusement. Mrs. Parker is cute. I always chuckle when she talks about computers and the Internet.

But right now, I find it hard to crack a smile. “Okay. Let me know if you need any help.”

“I better go.” Percy pivots toward the door as it swings open.

Oliver walks into the library, eyes laser-focused on me. His face is pale, and his hair sticks out in all directions like he was pulling at the ends.

Simply looking at him causes an uncomfortable pinch where my heart is. We barely got started and yet I feel our future slipping away like sand through my fingers. Fast and fleeting.

Hands outstretched, he approaches the desk. “Wren, let me explain.”

Chapter 8

Oliver

Percy pops her hip to one side, puts her hand on it, and glares at me. “You better explain. I’d like to hear what you have to say.”

Wren gently touches her sister’s shoulder. “Perce, this is between Oliver and me.”

Her younger sister huffs and reluctantly tears her eyes from me. “Fine. Call me.”

She pulls Wren in for a hug, then stomps out of the library without affording me so much as a glance. There’s no doubt, she’s ticked at me and wants me to know it.

“Wren...” I advance toward her and she holds up a hand in a sign to stop.

Before she can utter a word, Mrs. Parker interrupts, “Congratulations, Oliver. I heard the wonderful news.”

When I’d rushed in, I hadn’t noticed anyone but Wren and Percy. Although, truth be told, I wasn’t looking for anyone or anything other than Wren.

Shit. Mrs. Parker. She was at the Grill earlier. I blankly stare at her and remain mute, not knowing what to say. I won’t accept thanks—the baby isn’t mine—and cringe inwardly, imagining how quickly she must have made her way down Main Street like a town crier, eager to share the latest gossip.

Wren must already know. A sickening dread washes over me. I wanted a chance to explain, for her to hear it from me first.

Dammit. Damn Dot.

The older woman approaches the front desk, squinting at me, likely perplexed by my silence.

Wren slides in next to me, brushing my shoulder, and peers down at the lady. “Um, Mrs. Parker, if you’ll excuse us. Oliver doesn’t have a lot of time and I’ve asked him to help me with something.”

A hint of fresh flowers wafts over me, and I’m dizzy from Wren’s scent. The nearness of her. Nothing else matters when she’s close. I don’t care if Ada Parker thinks I’m rude or an idiot.

“Oh. Okay then.” The woman nods.

Wren tugs at the sleeve of my coat while still looking at Mrs. Parker. “Are you all right here? We’ll be upstairs for a little bit.”

The elderly lady fastens the last button on her coat and smiles up at Wren. “Oh, I’m done. I’ll get going.” She ambles to the door. “Please call me when that book comes in.”

“I will, Mrs. Parker. Have a nice day.” She beckons for me to follow her to the staircase and waits until we’re alone. “We’ll talk here. This way I can see the door.”

She’s all matter-of-fact, refusing to look me in the eyes. I reach for her and she flinches, squeezes her eyes shut, and inhales deeply.

“Why is Dot telling the whole town she’s pregnant with your baby?” Now she looks up at me, eyes glassy but grave. “You told me you haven’t been together for two years. That you’re over.”

“There’s no easy way to make sense of this.”

She immediately deflates and looks away, pinching her lips together. That’s when I realize my poor choice of words. “God, Wren, no. The baby isn’t mine. I just can’t explain why Dot would say it other than she doesn’t like to lose. I told her about us this morning and about wanting the Nest, and she didn’t take it well. I’m guessing this is retaliation.”

“So what, in the heat of the moment, Dot decides to say she’s pregnant?” Her disbelief rings in my ears. “I know she isn’t above doing something like this. She’s ruthless and unpredictable but this...this...” She struggles for the word. “This lie...she has to know that she’ll be called out eventually. You can only fake a pregnancy for so long.”

“I know it sounds crazy, and like I said, I can’t explain it.”

She leans against the banister and twists her lips in contemplation. “Oliver, if you slept with her... I don’t have to like it, but we weren’t together. I understand how or why something like that could happen. Living in close quarters with someone you used to love...”

Not this again. Didn’t she believe me last night? I grab on to her shoulders and turn her to face me. Staring intently into her troubled brown eyes, I infuse as much sincerity as possible into my next words. “I haven’t had sex with her in over two years. Not even so much as a kiss.” There’s no point in telling her that Dot tried to seduce me, wear me down, but never succeeded. “And my relationship with Dot was nothing even close to love. I never loved her.”

Dot isn’t who I want. Not then and certainly not now. If I thought it would help, I might tell Wren every sordid detail of the proverbial tug-of-war with my ex-girlfriend. But Wren’s already doubting me, and this is an agony I never knew existed. I’d never lie to her, and I hate that I have to somehow, some way figure out how to get her to believe me. To believe in us.

I bend my knees and dip my head so that I’m at her eye level. “I hate to even think it, but this is Dot we’re talking about. I wouldn’t put it past her to actually get pregnant or fake a miscarriage to wriggle out of this lie.”

Wren gasps and just as quickly nods. “God, both are horrible.”

“Yeah. One thing I know for certain is she’s lying about me. The baby isn’t mine.”

Wren's shoulders sag a bit, relaxing into my hold, and I let out my pent-up breath. Hope is a capricious thing, a blessing and a curse. Here I am weighing my words in the hope that the next one out of my mouth will erase all of Wren's questions and vanquish her doubt.

But does it really matter what I say? I can't control Dot or the lies she'll spin. This pregnancy lie could cost me Wren. And what if she gets her father to change the town name or succeeds in taking the Nest out from under me? Then what?

Wren looks up at me, expression not fully convinced, and my gut twists. "If she isn't pregnant, we have to believe the truth will come out."

I nod and chew on the inside of my cheek, trying to think like Dot. It's a scary thing and futile because I never did understand her or why she does the things she does when they only lead to mayhem and eventual hurt.

While the truth might come out, the downside is that could take a while, and I worry I'll run out of time. What if Wren gets too frustrated or disheartened or worse, drowns in too many doubts about me? She could walk away.

God, no.

I'm not sure what else to say to convince her. The silence drags between us, and Wren is deep in thought when suddenly, she points at me. "Unless..."

"What?"

"Unless she *is* pregnant and the baby isn't yours. But of course, she'd want everyone to think you're the father. You two haven't officially broken up, and if she were pregnant with another man's baby, people would think she cheated on you."

"But that could easily be fixed. All she'd have to say is that we've been apart for some time now. I would back her up."

"Oliver, you could make all of this go away. You could tell the town that you and Dot haven't been together for a while now and this baby, if it exists, can't possibly be yours." Her

stating what appears to be the obvious solution is a knee to the groin.

How do I begin to explain all that's at risk if I challenge Dot publicly? It's bad enough that my own brother thinks losing our legacy—the town name—and disappointing my dead father aren't reasons enough to stay quiet and push Dot to come clean.

Wren isn't finished and curls a hand around the railing, knuckles whitening as she clenches the wood. "I understand that you thought if you let Dot tell people about your breakup, things would go smoother. Clearly they haven't." Her frustration isn't lost on me, and my heart caves in on itself. "She's now telling people you're expecting a baby. And you seem to be okay with this."

"Shit, Wren. I swear to you, I'm not okay with any of this." I feel heat spreading from my chest, rising up to my face. "Dot's got me at gunpoint."

"What? I don't understand."

"I didn't tell you everything last night." I scratch at the back of my neck, suddenly uncomfortable in my own skin. "Not because I didn't want to. Only because I didn't want to ruin our night with how much trouble Dot is causing."

"Okay. I'm listening." Her wary gaze makes my stomach roil as I tell her about Mayor Malone's off-the-cuff remark about changing the town's name.

"Only days before we found ourselves together in the gym, I pushed Dot harder than I ever have before for ownership of the Nest and to tell everyone about our breakup. She lashed out and hinted at getting her father to follow through on changing the town name." My jaw clenches at the memory and Wren's lips part in surprise. "That's why I was leaving town so Dot would lose any hold over me."

"But, Oliver, can he do that? Change the town name just because?"

"Sure. The mayor is a persuasive man. It wouldn't take much for him to play to the egos of those with the power to

make it happen. I've seen him do it before. I have to tread carefully with Dot because her threats aren't idle."

"I can't imagine how you'd feel if that were to happen. For Winslow Grove to no longer exist. It wouldn't be the same even if the town remains—all that your family did, the history and pride..." Her troubled gaze searches mine, maybe looking for confirmation, and I grimly nod. "That would be horrible for you and for Eddie."

"Yeah, I couldn't live with myself if that happened because of me. Not when I can prevent it."

"So how do we deal with this so that Dot can't hold that over your head?"

Her use of the word "we" causes a wild fluttering of hope to spread throughout me, albeit fleeting. It doesn't last when I don't have an easy answer and there's still more to tell her.

"I don't know. I'm trying to figure that out. But Wren, there's more."

Blanching, she folds her arms over her waist in a protective gesture, and something pinches at the center of my chest. Does she feel like she needs protection from me?

I can't blame her if she does. All of this, all of these problems are because of me, and I've dragged her into this. And why? All because she wants to be with me. That may be how she feels now, but for how long?

As if settling in for something long or drawn out, she bends her knees and sits on one of the steps. "Oliver, tell me."

I sit beside her, and she abruptly stands then strides a few feet away. Her departure, cold and steadfast, settles into the dark recesses of my body.

I shiver. "We both know that having Dot as an enemy isn't smart. I'm trying to avoid that. Dot wants to take the Nest from me. She's co-owner and there's a noncompete clause that prevents either of us from starting our own custom furniture business within North America."

This is why the international deal with the Netherlands is so important. It would solve all this. I'd have money to buy her out or worst case, a chance at another company without violating the noncompete clause.

“What? North America? And for how long?”

“Yes and forever. Joint ownership was her father's idea, and I couldn't object at the time since he was putting up the money. My lawyer, Kendall, insisted on the noncompete given I was the talent behind the Nest. My plan was always to buy her out. We weren't going to be together forever.” Suddenly bile surges up my throat. “Shit, Wren, I'm such an idiot to let this happen. I never loved Dot. That right there should have been my first clue that I was making the biggest mistake of my life.”

Her expression softens but she maintains her distance. Piercing brown eyes entreat me to go on.

“The noncompete was the other reason why I planned to leave town. I found a loophole. A way to either get the money to buy her out or start my own business while sticking to the terms of our business agreement. I figured if I wasn't in Winslow Grove, there was less chance of her catching wind of what I was up to.”

“A loophole?”

“There's a company in the Netherlands interested in hiring me for a large job. If things weren't like this, it would be a huge opportunity to expand the Nest internationally. But now, because I might have to give the Nest to Dot, this account would open the door for me to work in Europe and maybe elsewhere. All of our discussions have been about hiring me, no mention of the business. They have two months before they need to decide on a contractor. So I have about a month to deliver a few sample pieces before they make their decision. They have another business that they'll go with if they don't like what I produce or if I can't meet the terms of their agreement.”

“And if you got this job, you'd use the money to buy out Dot? Or if she won't sell, then you'll start another company

that sells outside of North America?”

“Yep.”

“Would you have to move?”

“No. The client meetings are virtual or on the phone, and all orders come in online. I might have to travel once in a while, but I could stay here. That’s if you still want me to.”

“Oliver, of course I want you to stay. And even if we weren’t together, this is your home.” She takes a tentative step closer. “This is good news. I hate that you could lose the Nest, but you have options.”

“Yeah.”

“And I don’t want Dot or Mayor Malone or anyone to change the name of the town. I hate that she has you where she wants you. If you can’t say anything about the baby or the breakup, what does this mean for us?”

“Um...” I hadn’t thought this far ahead. It’s a good question.

She inches closer. “Until Dot sets things straight or the truth comes out another way, people think you are the father, and that means we can’t see each other.”

Dread sinks into my blood and bones at the reality of what Wren says. She fidgets with her hands and looks down at me. “You can’t stay at my house. Can you imagine the gossip? What people will say?”

Her words are a blow, and I’m thankful that I’m sitting down. “Fuck.” My fingers weave through my hair and pull. “I fucking hate this, but you’re right. There’s no way we can be seen together. Not while everyone thinks the baby is mine.”

Before Wren can react or retreat once more, I grab her hand and stare up at her. “I can’t *not* see you. This isn’t fair of me to ask. Can we keep our relationship on the down low?”

She tugs on my hand and I reluctantly release her. I can’t stand the actual distance between us or the anguish marring her beautiful face.

I get to my feet and rush to add, as if this will make everything better, “It would only be for a little bit. I need time to figure out how to take away Dot’s power, kill her threat to change the town name.”

“How?” Wren cuts in.

There’s an eagerness to her tone, and it buoys my belief that she isn’t going anywhere.

“I’m not sure. Maybe I could talk to the city council and other influential members of the town.”

“I suppose that could work, but you couldn’t risk Dot or the mayor finding out.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure that’s the way to go. And of course, once this deal in the Netherlands closes, I’ll strike to secure the Nest.”

Tilting her head to the side, she frowns. “The deal? You just said you have two months. You want us to be a secret for two months or more? And even at that, you won’t get all the money up front.”

I feel every grueling second of the two months or more that it might take for me to finally move on Dot. Buy her out or beat her at her own game and start my own international business.

Fuck, how can I ask this of Wren?

The woman of my dreams, the one who got away and is now, finally in my grasp—how can I ask her to wait?

No, not just wait, but sneak around like we’re some dirty little secret.

“I’m trying my best to shorten that timeframe. I’ve already made one piece and I’m working on the other. Maybe a month. Six weeks at the most. Even as I do that, I’m not backing off on Dot. My lawyer’s going to send her the papers and if she agrees, this could be over in a couple of weeks.”

She opens her mouth, and her pained expression prepares me for what I’m guessing will be a protest. But we’re interrupted by someone walking into the library.

Wren glances over her shoulder and I look to the door. Pop stands only feet from us, hands on his hips, glowering at me.

“Oliver, we need to talk now.”

Chapter 9

Oliver

“Pop, we’re in the middle of something.” Wren turns to fully face him and gestures with her hand between her father and me. “This will have to wait.”

“Sorry, it can’t.” His broody gaze never leaves my face.

He hasn’t indicated why he has this sudden urgency to talk to me, but if I had to bet on it, I’m fairly confident I’d walk away a jackpot winner. I have a pretty good idea what’s on his mind.

I sidle up next to Wren. “Pop, we agreed to talk tomorrow.”

“Forget tomorrow. After that spectacle earlier, I’ve got questions and can’t wait for answers.”

“How’d you know he was here?” Wren crosses her arms over her chest, eyes keenly studying her father in a less than impressed way.

“Saw him come into the library from the Grill.”

She rolls her eyes and huffs. “You know, for all the years you thrust adult responsibilities on me even when I was a child, you sure are forgetting that I’m an adult. I don’t need you butting into my business or fighting my battles.”

“Wren.” He softens his tone, eyes finally seeking out his daughter. “Come here.”

He takes her hand and leads her toward the back of the library. I can still see them, but they’re too far away for me to hear them.

Pop's hands rest on Wren's shoulders as he faces her and looks down at her tenderly. His voice is so low, I've got no clue what he's saying. Within seconds, Wren's nodding in agreement.

Her posture softens. She dips her head and wipes at the corner of one eye. Is she crying? What the hell did he say to her?

Then she's walking toward me, determination painted on her face. "Oliver, we're done here."

"What? No, we aren't." My spine straightens, ramrod.

Wren never did agree to keep seeing me in secret. So much feels left unsaid between us.

"I'll talk to you later." Her dismissive tone hits me like a missile.

I grip the counter, legs wobbling, and Pop grunts at me, hooking a finger to follow him. Wren is now behind the front desk, eyes glued to the computer like I'm not even there.

The sun slips behind a curtain of clouds as I step outside and shadow Pop on his way to the parking lot.

"We're going to my place." He clicks the key fob to unlock the doors to his truck. "Get in."

"Uh, why can't we talk here?" I plan on going back inside to finish things with Wren. This can't be the end of us.

He marches around to my side of the truck and swings the passenger door open. "Get in."

Light blue eyes pierce me, and it's plain to see there's no room to negotiate. My heart pounds fast against my rib cage. Pop can certainly be a take-no-prisoners kind of man when he needs to be, but never before have I seen this side of him directed at me.

I do as the man commands and hop into the truck. We don't talk on the short drive to his house, and even once we arrive, he ambles from the truck to his shed without so much as a word to me.

As before, it's clear to see he expects me to follow him, and while I do, my throat dries and closes in panic. All I want is to have Wren, Pop, and Percy in my life. My family. Yet now, because of Dot and her lies, I feel like I'm wading in quicksand. Nothing is solid or sure, and with my next breath or next move, I could lose everything. Sink into the abyss.

Unable to take the silence anymore, I sidle next to him. "Pop, you're killing me here. Let me explain."

He slides his toolbox out from the bottom shelf and stands. "Grab that two-by-four." With only a quick point in the general direction of the wood, he ambles out of the workshop toward the back of the house.

Quickly, I haul the wood onto my shoulder and awkwardly jog after him. "Uh, I hope you're enjoying this. If you're aiming to torture me with silence, it's working."

He stops so unexpectedly that I almost smack into him but manage to swerve at the last second.

"You always did try to use humor to cool the waters." He rocks back on his heels and mashes his lips together as if contemplating how best to drag this out.

"I meant no disrespect. I came into the Grill today intending to explain everything. Apologize—"

"Do you think it's funny that a father has to learn his daughter's with a man that everyone believes is engaged to another woman? And then, not even a blink later, he learns said man got his fiancée knocked up."

The question must be rhetorical, it has to be, but even still, he stares at me expectantly. Like I can somehow put all his fears and doubts to rest with my response. *If only.*

"Uh, things aren't as they seem." I grit my teeth at the warm rush of a blush creeping onto my face.

"Well, then, how the fuck are they?"

I stumble on my feet, shocked at Pop's cursing for the second time today. The man doesn't swear or at least never did in my presence.

He's got me by the proverbial balls and there's nothing I can do but take it. I'm at fault here, and he has every right to put me in my place. To expect me to answer to him for this fuckup.

Resigned to his ire and fully deserving of it, my shoulders droop and I remove the two-by-four and stand it up.

Like a garbage truck, I unload the entire messy fiasco that is my relationship with Dot. I spare no detail from my confession of always loving Wren—which isn't a surprise to him—to winding up with Dot in a stupid attempt to amuse myself.

Fucking idiot.

Even still, I keep it brief. Pop doesn't have the patience for a long drawn-out story.

When I end on Dot's latest threat to change the town name, his frown deepens. "Damn, that woman. I've heard rumblings of this from some of the city council."

"You have?" Blood rushes to my head, and suddenly, I'm lightheaded.

My fingers tighten their grasp on the wood and I lean into it, trying to steady my legs.

"Not recently—when your father was alive." Pop looks out onto his land as if weighing whether or not to say more.

When his eyes meet mine, I'm not sure what he sees, but it's enough to spur him on. "Your father was a pompous ass, and he got high and mighty with the Winslow name. That rubbed some people the wrong way. You gotta be careful with this threat. I don't think it would take much convincing from Dot for Bill Malone to jump all over it."

"Shit." One of my fists thumps against my thigh in frustration.

This isn't what I wanted to hear. Yet it's just as well I know what I'm dealing with. I can't let the Malones destroy my family legacy.

Pop places a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “Listen, if it comes to that, we’ll fight it. My advice... don’t push Dot on this. Let it lie. Sounds like you two have a lot to quarrel over as it is; just don’t bring this into the fray.”

Weak-kneed and anxious, I nod with the sudden urge to move. If I stand here like this I might vomit. I hoist the plank onto my shoulder again and start walking. Pop steps in beside me.

It feels good to have my blood pumping to all parts of my body. Although the relief doesn’t last long.

“And how does Wren factor into all of this?” Pop eyes me as we walk toward the treehouse.

“I love her. I want to be with her but—”

“Dot isn’t going to let that happen without a fight. That woman was born to make trouble.”

“Yeah. I’ll do everything in my power to—”

He stops and places a hand on my arm, causing me to halt. “Listen, Oliver. Don’t make declarations that you have no control over.” His hand falls away, and he hangs his head for a beat. “I don’t like any of this. I don’t like that Wren’s in Dot’s orbit. But you can’t stop any of it. Neither can I. If Wren wants to be with you...”

He trudges a few more feet to the treehouse and I wonder if he’s done with me, with this conversation. And somehow this feels worse than if he’d let me have it.

“Pop.” I lumber to his side and drop the two-by-four. “Do you hate the idea of Wren and me?”

Even as I ask, a queasiness rises inside me. I love and respect this man. If he doesn’t want me with his daughter, I’m not sure how I’ll deal with it. I won’t walk away from Wren; I don’t have it in me. She’s all I want and love. But if Pop is against us, where does that leave my relationship with him?

“Nah. You two are meant to be together. It was obvious from when you were kids, but it isn’t for me to decide or to get

involved.” He places his toolbox on the grass and squats to open it. “Listen, we’re going to replace that beam.”

He points up at a rotting post on the floor of the treehouse. I’m speechless for a beat or two, trying to process everything he said and make the switch in topic.

“We could also rip those two out as well.” He gets to his feet and surveys the structure from several different angles. “Aw, we might as well tear it down—”

“No.” My sharp blurt causes both of us to jump. “Uh, what I meant was, you can’t.”

I inch toward the tree and rest my palm against its rough surface as if to feel a pulsating heartbeat—the life force of this tree, the history and memories buried deep within the layers of bark.

“This...” I swallow past the sudden ball of emotions clogging my throat. “The treehouse is special. There’s a lot of memories, and just think, one day your grandkids would have a place to play when they visit their Pop.”

The image flashes through my mind, fast and glorious. Wren’s and my children running, laughing, and playing in this yard, up in the treehouse. Percy’s little ones clambering up the ladder, begging to be included.

Pop nods and something flickers in his knowing gaze, almost like approval or adoring expectation. He sees it too, wants it as much as I do. Then the moment is broken as he turns to his toolbox.

Evidently done with our conversation and my emotional ramblings, he barks orders at me to get to work on repairing the treehouse.

This is how I came to love working with my hands and building things. It was through the many hours and countless projects I helped Pop with. I didn’t realize it at the time, not until I came home from college and was asked by a friend to build a crib for their first child. The wood in my hands, the power to shape and mold, and eventually seeing my vision

come to life—all of it transports me to a peaceful and empowering place where anything is possible.

The nick of my hand against the grain jerks me from my musings, and I stare down at my palm. There's a small gash, some skin broken, and a small piece of wood sticking out.

I pull the piece from my hand. "Pop, you got any gloves?"

He pauses in his task, eyebrow arching. "What? Are you getting soft in your old age?"

I chuckle, rub my palm against my jeans, and get back to work. Of course, he wouldn't use gloves. I'll suck it up and check for splinters later.

We work companionably and get a lot done in a couple of hours. As we near the end of the job, I've just finished hammering the last nail into place when Pop's the one to initiate more conversation.

"Why did you let the rift or distance with Wren keep you away?" He doesn't look at me as he cleans his tools with a rag and drops each one into the box.

"I shouldn't have. I realize that now. But at the time, I was trying to respect Wren's wishes. Or what I thought she wanted." I wipe the sweat off my forehead with the back of my hand, and a shiver dances up my spine. The air is cooling as the sun dips down in the sky. "We never really talked, just seemed to grow apart, and you were *her* father. The Grill was *her* family's business. I felt like I'd be intruding if I just showed up."

"The Grill's mine." His finger pokes the center of his chest. "I would've welcomed you anytime. So long as you don't hurt my girls, you're always welcome."

While his admission is comforting, if not something I wish I'd heard or known all those years ago, I worry it isn't enough for our current circumstance. "Pop, what about now?"

"What?"

"I don't want to hurt Wren. God, it's the last thing I want." I shove my hands into my front pockets. "But like you said, I

can't control what's going to happen as much as I wish I could. What if..."

"What if she gets hurt?" He closes the box. "I don't want her hurt. Never. But so long as it isn't by your direct doing, we're good." His hand curls around the back of my neck and he hauls me closer to him. "Oliver, you're like a son to me."

Both of his big, capable hands now grip the nape of my neck and he closes the gap until our foreheads are almost touching. "Welcome home, son."

His arm slides around my back, and I willingly fall into his embrace. I have finally come home, and the sensation causes tears of joy and relief to swell in my chest. It takes everything in me not to let them fall.

The sound of a car door slamming pulls us apart. I half turn to wipe at my eyes, and Pop clears his throat and runs the back of his hand across his face.

"You stay put. Finish putting this away and I'll go see."

I watch his broad, muscled back as he traipses across the lawn. The sun's beginning to set, the sky now warm shades of muted orange, pink, and mauve.

It doesn't take me more than a few seconds to gather the remaining tools and place them in the box. When I look up again, Pop stops short of breaching the front of his house. His back straightens and I start closing the gap, jogging toward him, not sure of who or what he sees, but not liking his demeanor.

I still have several feet to go when his brusque voice slices through the descending twilight. "There's no need for you to be here."

Chapter 10

Wren

My father saunters from the side of the yard, a surly expression painting his usually placid face. “There’s no need for you to be here.”

My jaw tightens at his rude response to seeing me. “You didn’t kill him, did you? Please tell me Oliver’s still breathing.” It’s meant as a joke though lined with an ounce of truth and concern.

Pop tilts his head back and laughs. He slaps a hand against his jean-clad thigh, and that’s when I get a better look at him. Grass stains and splotches of mud splatter his jeans, and his face has a light sheen of sweat to it.

Before he can respond, Oliver clears the house, looking much like Pop, and smiles at me. “Wren. Everything okay?”

Suddenly, I feel silly for coming over here. From the looks of things, they were working on something and all seems fine.

“Um, it’s just when I didn’t hear from you and a few hours had passed...”

“You thought you’d come looking for him.” Pop gently elbows Oliver, his manner teasing. “Rescue your man from your mean ol’ Pop?”

I scoff and wave off the image. “You’re not mean and I wasn’t worried. Well, not really.”

“Well, I know you didn’t come here to see me.” Pop turns toward the house. “I’ll leave you two to talk.” He claps Oliver

on the back and gives me a quick kiss on the cheek before he's gone.

Oliver rubs his hands along his thighs and grimaces. "I'm a mess. We were working on the treehouse."

"Good. Pop's been meaning to fix it for a while now." I suck on my lower lip, now more nervous and a little uncertain of why I came here. Of what we need to talk about. "Uh, I know we didn't settle things before, and I didn't want to leave things like that either."

He strolls closer to me. "Me neither. We still need to settle how we're going to handle things."

With him so near, I toss my doubts and insecurities to the wind and pull on the lapels of his jacket, bringing us close. "I love you. The thought of giving up before we've even begun or hitting pause..." I bend my head, shaking it in utter refusal before I stare up at him again.

His warm hazel eyes smolder, the flecks of copper appearing almost golden, and I take all of him in as he studies my face.

"Oliver, I can't. I won't give up on us, no matter the challenge. And while I'm not wild about sneaking around, if it means I get to spend time with you, then I'm okay with it."

"Ah, fuck, Wren. Thank you." His lips land on me, and every knot of tension melts from my body as our lips taste and tongues tangle. His mouth puffs out warm air as he breaks our hungry kiss. "I'm so sorry that I even had to ask this of you. I want nothing more than to shout from the rooftops how fucking in love with you I am. Hiding is the last thing I want. Instead, I want everyone in Winslow Grove and beyond to know we're together."

I laugh at the purpose and promise of his words. "I want all of that too, and we'll get there. I know it."

His hand cups the back of my neck, fingers sliding through my hair as he bends his head once more. His tongue slips into my mouth and I'm dizzy, intoxicated by his kiss. A soft groan from deep in his throat hits me in my core as his hand tilts my

head to the side and back to deepen the kiss. I press my body against his without any thought for where we are or that my father is nearby and slip my arm around his back. Our tongues duel and lips suck.

Oliver is the only one with the sense to pause.

He presses a gentle kiss on my jaw and my eyelids flutter open. "I'll leave you with Pop."

"Why don't you stay?" His breath is hot against my mouth.

"I can't. Jack's at the library. I have to get back."

* * *

"Have you seen Oliver?" Zoe, my best friend, exits the Grill next to me into the brisk, sunny early October day.

I quickly whirl around, checking that no one is close by to overhear our conversation.

"Relax. We're alone." She chuckles. "I wouldn't have asked otherwise."

"Sorry. Keeping us a secret has me on edge. I don't like it."

"I hate it for you, but at least you're together."

I snort and roll my eyes. "Are we? I haven't seen him in days."

Zoe and my family, Pop and Percy, are the only ones to know Oliver and I are together, even if in secret.

She raises an eyebrow. "Days? Why and have you talked to him?"

The brisk autumn wind sweeps across our path, prickling at my exposed skin and causing my eyes to water.

"It's been tricky to find the time. Yes, we've talked and texted."

"Is he staying at Eddie's?"

“Yes, and he hasn’t talked to Dot since her big announcement. Although she’s still going around town telling everyone they’re expecting and that the wedding is still on.” I sigh at the futility of it all, ignoring the sharp pang in my chest.

“That pisses me off.” She tucks a curly strand of hair behind her ear. “Tell me you’re pissed off.”

“I’m trying not to be, but it’s hard. I have to keep reminding myself about the endgame. We will be together.” I hate the sound of my voice as if I’m trying to convince myself of our inevitability as much as I am Zoe.

It’s difficult to stay optimistic when we’re apart.

“Sorry, I’m not helping. You’re right. You love him.” She pauses to study my face, and I’m not sure what she sees, but frown lines now pleat her forehead. “You do love him, right?”

“Of course. Yes.” I laugh but it’s hollow, lifeless. “If this is what we have to do to be together, I’ll suck it up for a couple of weeks.”

“Weeks? Didn’t you say it could be months.”

I groan and shake my head in frustration. “You’re not helping.”

“Sorry. God, I’m the worst. Let’s talk about something else. How’s it going with the program? Have you heard from the city council? The mayor?”

I let slip another groan and hang my head. “I’m still waiting, and to make things worse, the mayor canceled my meeting. His office said they’d call to reschedule but haven’t.” That familiar anxiety deep in my gut stirs, gnawing at me.

I got the call from the mayor’s office the day after Dot’s public news, and I worried the two were connected. What if she’d told her father about Oliver and me? Or worse, followed through on her threat?

“Listen.” Zoe grabs my wrist and yanks me out of my anxiety-inducing thoughts. “Everything’s going to work out.

This is a great program, and even if you don't get city funding or approval, you've already helped the kids immeasurably."

"Helping them with their college applications is all well and good, but I can't sit back while I could be doing more. I need the funding and the legitimacy that the seal of approval from the city council will give the program. I worry that the sponsoring families aren't going to back this without it."

"Okay, but there are other ways to do this. You could go private."

"True. It will take longer. It won't happen this year. Jack, Bray, and Court won't benefit from the program."

She nods solemnly, knowing how important it is to me to begin helping the kids this year.

"I'm sure it'll be approved any day now. And like I've said, I've got your back. Tell me where and when, and I'll take pictures at the official launch ceremony."

I force as much excitement and gratitude as possible into the upturn of my mouth. Zoe's a talented photographer with dreams of doing more than weddings, baby shots, and town festivities. When she heard about what I wanted to achieve, she graciously offered to chronicle the key milestones of Bright Horizons and even helped create a website.

"Thank you." I pull her in for a hug.

"Any time. I gotta go. I have pictures to develop and then I'm scouting locations for additional pictures of Katie and Raf."

"Oh, yes, you're doing their wedding, aren't you?"

"Who else would be doing it?"

"Good point."

"Guess who's coming home for the wedding?"

"Who?"

"Maddox Hartley."

We went to high school with Maddox, and he was one of Oliver's closest friends. Shortly after graduating, he made it big as a race car driver, sponsored by some European company with deep pockets. Now he travels the world and hasn't been home since. But now, it sounds like he's coming back for his younger sister's wedding.

"Wow. I haven't seen him in forever. Who told you? Katie?"

"Uh-huh."

"Is Erica coming too?" She was his high school sweetheart and they took off together.

"Don't know. Anyway, I'll talk to you later."

"Bye." We hug and I head for the library.

In the distance, I spot a man slipping in between two buildings and don't give much thought until I near the spot. I slow, not sure who or what I'll find.

Once at the opening to the narrow alley, I see a man and a woman several feet from the street, partially hidden by the shadows. Though I can't make out their faces, something about them—their hand gestures and profiles—is familiar.

It doesn't take me long to figure out who they are. Dot Malone and Kellen Marshall, the town outcast. What an odd pair.

They're deep in conversation, neither aware of my presence. I can only make out the odd word and hush of their urgent whispers, but their body language gives them away. They're arguing.

I should keep walking—this is none of my business—but I don't. Can't. A strange tingling runs along the back of my neck. Call it intuition or a sixth sense, because I have nothing else to base this on. Yet I can't shake the feeling this interaction between these two is important, maybe even connected to me.

My back presses against a brick wall, trying to look inconspicuous, and I watch. Dot violently waves her hands in

the air, her wispy thin hair flying around her head like a tornado. Kellen's hands curl into fists at his side. Back ramrod straight and jaw clenched, he's like a powder keg ready to blow.

His thunderous, "Dammit, Dot" hits me square in the stomach, and as if to punctuate what comes next, Kellen's fingers stab at the electrically charged air between them. "This is bullshit. I have rights too, you know."

Foolishly, I suck in a breath, and this causes Dot to swing her head in my direction. *Shit.*

Her eyes widen then quickly narrow as she stares daggers at me. It's too late to hide, and I'm not sticking around for her wrath. I scurry toward the library.

As I sprint across the street, Kellen's words boom like a church bell in my mind. "*I have rights too.*"

What could Dot and Kellen possibly have to talk about? And what rights? He's a troublemaker, and as far as I knew, Dot looked down her nose at him.

Back in elementary school, he used to be best friends with Oliver and Maddox. By the first year of high school, they parted ways with Kellen. He left chaos in his wake and nothing has changed. Kellen lives on the fringe of our community, both literally and figuratively, whereas Dot's at the center of everything.

Even still, Kellen has a certain kind of appeal that attracts some of the women in this town. He may be bad, but he's good-looking, and if the rumors are true, he knows how to treat a woman.

I can't shake the feeling their conversation has something to do with Dot's news. The baby. Could...could Kellen be the father?

Heart racing and slightly out of breath, I walk into the library where Jack is checking someone out. Two days a week, he has spare time during my lunch hour and comes to the library to relieve me.

“Hey, Jack.” I remove my coat, still trying to catch my breath. “Thanks so much.”

“No problem.” He steps from behind the front desk. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” I don’t push for why he’s asking.

I feel guilty for eavesdropping on what was a private conversation and worse, getting caught by none other than Dot Malone.

“Okay. I’ve got to finish up this essay and then I’ll get going. If that’s all right.” He strolls over to the row of desks.

“Absolutely.” Still on edge, I steal a look out the front door before slipping behind the counter.

The coast is clear. *Phew.*

While cataloging the latest shipment of books and CDs, I try to bury the incessant questions about Kellen and Dot. It’s futile, but I want to know, especially since it might help the situation between Oliver and Dot.

Not long after, the last person I want to see stomps into the library, arm outstretched and finger pointed at me. “What the hell do you think you were doing?” Dot slaps her palms down onto the counter, glaring at me.

Well, so much for a successful escape. Either way, it looks like there’s no avoiding the aftermath of my poor spying.

“Hi, Dot.” My calm tone belies the roiling in my stomach. “What are you talking about?”

I glance around to see if anyone is in the library. Jack gapes from where he perches on the chair, ready to spring into action if needed. Except for the small kitchenette and bathroom in the back, I can see most of the ground floor. No one else is here, although someone may be upstairs.

“Don’t play dumb.” Dorothy Malone is a beautiful woman even when fuming. All around town, heads turn at her petite stature, hourglass figure, and long, shimmering hair. Despite all this, she usually looks sullen, much like right now.

“I’m not.” My fingers curl around the edge of the counter, grateful for the space between us.

She leans in, gaze narrowing, and lowers her voice to a harsh whisper. “I don’t know what you think you saw, but you better forget it.”

“I didn’t see anything.”

“You better keep it that way.” Her finger is now a mere inch from my face. “Or else your stupid little program won’t be approved. All it would take is one call to Daddy.”

My insides freeze. On one hand, her threat means she hasn’t said anything to her father, but on the other hand, she’s thought of it, and it wouldn’t take much to kill my program.

She really is something. The expression on her face is pure hatred, and I’m speechless, not sure how to respond without fighting fire with fire. As much as I want to, it isn’t a good idea to take her on. It would be like pouring gasoline on an already out of control flame.

Catastrophic.

Tone terse and gaze never wavering from hers, I push her finger from my face. “Like I said before, I didn’t see anything and don’t know what you’re talking about. You don’t need to come here throwing around threats. Leave the Bright Horizons program alone.”

“Uh, Miss Wren.” Jack stands behind Dot, clearly having overheard what I said if not Dot’s threat too. “I need to get back to school. Are you going to be okay?”

He glares at the back of the blonde’s head, but Dot acts as if he isn’t even there.

Cheeks heating, I plaster on what feels like a wonky smile. “Jack, I’m good. Thanks again for all of your help.”

“Um...” He hesitates, likely not satisfied with my response and worried given his frown.

I can’t have him caught in the crossfire. “Jack, you better get back to school.”

Expression as awkward as I feel, he dips his chin in agreement and walks to the door. “Uh, sure. See you later.”

Jack pauses at the door to peer over his shoulder at me. Our gazes lock. Worry etches his fresh face, and with a smile, I reassure him that I’ll be fine.

As soon as the door closes behind him, I sigh in relief. Now to get rid of Dot.

She slides back from the counter so I can see her from head to toe. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you, and now seems as good a time as any...” She places her hands on her flat belly with a single word. “Oliver.”

My hands tremble with misguided guilt, and I shove them into my pockets while forcing a puzzled expression. “What about him?”

God, I’m going to hell for the lies I’ve told in the past five minutes.

“You’ve got nothing to say for yourself? You’ve always wanted Oliver. Don’t think I didn’t notice.”

She isn’t wrong, and every jab of her pointer finger stabs at my culpable heart. Even if she was all wrong for him and made Oliver unhappy, she did have him first.

“Dot, I—”

One hand slashes through the air in a kind of canceling motion. “Just shut up. I don’t want to hear your lies. I’m sure you’ve heard by now. We’re having a baby.”

Her silly smile and the way she rubs her hand in circles over her stomach make me sick. She tips her nose into the air as if to look down on me even though I’m five ten and tower over her.

Dot’s demeanor holds nothing but contempt. “He’s mine.”

As much as I want to tell her otherwise and yell for all to hear that I know the truth and that she has no claim on him, my lips remain tightly sealed.

And even still, the truth brings no comfort. It doesn't stop the jagged claws of guilt from ripping into my chest. Why does it feel like I stole her fiancé? Like I cheated?

Stop it, Wren. That simply isn't true.

Dot's scorn-laden voice cuts through my unsettling thoughts. "This little Miss Innocent, doe-eyed act doesn't work on me. He told me about you two. I know what's going on, or what *you* want to happen. I'm here to tell you to back the hell off. Stay away from him or I'll make sure Bright Horizons never gets approved."

She strides confidently toward the door, stopping with one hand on the handle to fire one more missile. "Oliver Winslow is mine."

I stare at the back of her, marching out of the library, and an unsettling dread overcomes me. Hot, slippery bile clings to the back of my throat. Dot has all the power, and I'm no longer sure of the path to being with Oliver out in the open.

Chapter II

Oliver

I shut the truck door and stand for a second under the pale moonlight, staring at Wren's home. All the lights are out. The house is in darkness.

What else did I expect? It's two in the morning and I should hope she's asleep. It's hard to believe the last time I was here was over two weeks ago. Only a few days after the gym when I thought everything was going to work out because I had Wren.

Now look at us. We're supposed to be sneaking around, but I've been swamped with the Nest and getting the final sample finished for the potential deal with Mercury Boetiek. The sooner I get that signed, the better.

I miss Wren so much, want to see her, even if she's sleeping. But will I be welcomed? I should go back to Eddie's and try to fucking sleep, but I can't.

We're both not doing so well with this self-imposed separation. While we talk and text daily, the physical distance has seeped into our virtual connections. All of our interactions are brief, and we only cover meaningless, surface stuff.

Both of us avoid talking about Dot. I haven't seen or heard from my ex, and I've instructed Kendall, my lawyer, to hold off on the papers for ownership of the Nest. Based on what Pop said about not pushing the town name change threat, I've decided to leave Dot alone. Give her the impression she may be winning. I'm hoping the false sense of victory will buy us

time and maybe, just maybe, lead to something I can use to get out from under her lies and threats.

But I'm going crazy not seeing Wren. That's why I'm outside her house in the middle of the night, about to enter with the key she gave me.

I open the front door, my phone flashlight on, and I'm immediately faced with a barrage of barks from Gretzky and a wailing moan from Jordan. *Dammit, why didn't I think about her pets?*

The whippet growls, crouching low to the ground and baring his teeth.

I try to keep my voice low and calming. "It's okay, G. It's just me."

Jordan rubs up against my pant leg. Oh, now he wants to play like we're friends. At least he's now quiet. Before I can even get the dog to settle, to realize he knows me and that I'm not a threat, the overhead lights flick on.

With long, red hair bed-mussed and a sleepy expression, Wren stands in the hallway. She's in a long-sleeved flannel pajama top with her legs bare and enticing. Immediately, both animals silence and amble over to her side.

She squints at me, eyes still adjusting to the bright lights. "Oliver?" Her voice is still groggy from sleep. "What time is it?"

"Around two. Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"Why are you here?" Her question catches me off guard—I'm not wanted—and regret has me in a chokehold, closing off my airway and ability to speak.

I shouldn't have come. Capricious hope laughs in my ear at how flat and disinterested she appears, not in the least bit happy to see me.

"Oliver?" She leans against the wall, clearly still half asleep and needing a bed or something to keep her up.

This I can do. In two quick strides, I'm at her side and hook an arm around her waist to bring her close. I prepare for

the worst. For her to stiffen or pull away. She does neither.

Instead, she sinks into me, her head falling to rest against my collarbone. She turns her face into my chest.

She breathes me in as a tiny, contented sigh sails past her lips. “You smell so good.”

I chuckle in relief as warmth spreads through me. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come without calling, but it was late and I—”

“I’m happy to see you.” She flicks off the lights and takes my hand.

Trudging up the dark stairway to her bedroom, she pulls me along even though she needn’t. I’ll willingly follow. Gretzky and Jordan take up the rear, and my lips rise at the corners at our little quartet.

Perfection. Everything about this feels right. Like puzzle pieces finally snapping into place. Home. This is what I was missing, longing for, all those nights I lay awake in Eddie’s guest room.

Fatigue settles in, a bone-deep exhaustion, the culmination of too many sleepless nights, and I can’t wait to get into bed. I want nothing more than to pull Wren into my arms.

Slowly, my eyes adapt to the dark and I can make out her bedroom.

She doesn’t turn on any lights, drops my hand, and makes a beeline for the bed. “You’re staying the night.”

It’s more a statement than a question, her tone devoid of emotion. I don’t want to presume anything.

“If you’ll have me.”

She slides under the covers, mumbles “Sure,” yawns, and rolls over.

Well, that wasn’t what I was expecting. I’d hoped for some kind of affirmation that she wanted me with her. Always.

I shed my jeans and shirt. Like their mother, the dog and cat pay me no mind. Both snuggle into their respective

cushioned beds on the floor at the foot of the bedframe as if I'm not even there.

Only in boxers, I slide in beside her and hesitate to do much else. Now what? I want to pull her close, yet I'm sensing a distance from Wren.

"You asleep?" Even as I ask the question, I know she isn't. She lies beside me, back to me, her posture too taut to be asleep.

She rolls onto her back and then to face me. "What are you really doing here?" The skepticism in her voice is like a jab to the gut.

Tentatively, my knuckles glide along her cheekbone. "I miss you."

She shivers and closes her eyes but doesn't say anything similar. Until now, I never realized how desperately I wanted to hear her tell me the same. To know that we're still in this together.

Her eyes stay closed, and she presses her lips together in a twist of anguish. Everything about her guts me.

"Wren, apart from the obvious, what's wrong?"

Her eyes pop open and it's too dark to make out their intensity, hot or cold. "Where do you want me to start? We might not get any sleep tonight."

"I don't care about sleep. I care about you." There's more edge to my voice than I intend and she stiffens. I soften my voice and slide my hand to the side of her neck, resting it there on the warmth of her smooth skin. "Tell me what's wrong. This sucks, I know, but it feels like there's something more going on."

"Dot paid me a visit. She threatened to kill Bright Horizons if I didn't stay away from you and keep my mouth shut. Said all it would take was for her to talk to her father."

My gut clenches just imagining Dot in Wren's face. But she can't do this. "The mayor would be a fool to turn the program down no matter what Dot says."

“I don’t know. He spoils his daughter, and he has the power to veto the proposal without the council’s input. I was supposed to meet with him earlier this week and he canceled. I can’t lose Bright Horizons.”

My hand slides to the back of her neck and squeezes. “You won’t. Wren, I’m sorry Dot’s causing trouble for you. I could talk to her.”

“No. She can’t know we’re talking.”

“I told her that we’re together.”

“It’s one thing to know and another to see it with her own two eyes. To her, I denied our existence as a couple. It’s like you said; let her think she’s winning. I can’t risk Bright Horizons.”

I run a hand down my face, hating all of this. “I get it. What can I do?”

“Nothing. You were right about us keeping things a secret. As much as I hate it, Dot would go ballistic if we flaunted our relationship in front of her face even without the baby.” She flops back onto the pillow. “The baby. That reminds me. I saw Dot and Kellen arguing in the alley between Beyond the Cake and the bank on the way back from lunch.”

“Kellen? Is this what you meant about her telling you to keep your mouth shut?”

“Uh-huh. I should have just kept walking, but something told me there was more going on there. So I watched them, and while I couldn’t hear the conversation, at one point, Kellen shouted bullshit and that he had rights.”

“Rights? What would Dot and Kellen have to talk about that had to do with rights?”

“That’s what I’ve been wondering.” She turns to face me again. “What if it’s about the baby? Maybe he’s the father.”

“Kellen.” I bark out a laugh. “Dot hates him. To her, Kellen Marshall is the bottom of the barrel. She wouldn’t be caught dead with him, let alone sleep with him.”

She bites her lip, clearly apprehensive and digging deep for the courage for her next words. “Does the idea of them together bother you?”

“Fuck, no. It’s just it doesn’t fit.”

“It does sound crazy. Kellen’s the town bad boy. Still, he is a ladies’ man, or I should say, Dot wouldn’t be the first upstanding woman to jump into bed with him.”

The memory of Marla, Doctor Fairchild’s wife, reminds me that anything is possible. “True.”

Not too long ago, the town gossips were blazing hot and constant with the scandalous affair between Marla and Kellen. Shortly after that, the married couple left town. Could Kellen be the father?

Wren cuts through my thoughts. “So, this may sound even more farfetched, and it might be wishful thinking on my part, but one thing I remember from elementary and high school was how Kellen envied you and Maddox.”

Deep lines form along her forehead as if she’s worried I’ll dismiss her idea. I get why she might think that. At one time, the three of us were inseparable. Kellen was once a close friend.

Heck, at one time, Wren and I used to joke that Kellen brought us together in second grade. I forget all the details now. It was lunch time and he was mad at me for something, so mad that he dumped my sandwich into the trash.

Wren saw the whole thing. She marched over to Kellen and told him how mean he was. Then she turned and handed me half of her peanut butter and jelly sandwich. From that point on, I was a goner. She became my best friend and more.

Even now, Kellen causes trouble, lashes out, and hurts people more than anything else.

“I guess. I’m not sure what it was, even though Kellen did always go after what Mad or I wanted. What are you thinking?”

“What if he slept with Dot because she was *your* fiancée?”

“Okay, that might explain Kellen’s motivation, even though we are talking about sex and he’s...well, him.” I offer a sardonic smile. “But Dot would never sleep with him.”

Her expression is pensive and we’re both quiet, most probably running through the possibilities.

I slide a finger under her chin and tip her head up so our eyes meet. “There’s no point wasting our time on this. It’s a theory. You don’t have any proof.”

“No, I don’t. But I’m not done. Dot saw me spying on them, and even though I took off, she found me in the library.”

“Shit.” Something dire claws at my throat.

“That’s when she threatened the program if I didn’t keep my mouth shut about what I saw, and for added measure, she told me to stay away from you.”

“When was this? Today?”

“Two days ago.”

“Why didn’t you tell me when it happened?”

“What were you going to do? Everyone thinks the baby is yours and that you’re together. We agreed to go along with it for now.”

She might as well have hit me given how my head spins, and my jaw aches from clenching my teeth together.

“Shit, Wren. You make me sound like an asshole.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. Our hands are tied. Dot thinks you’re hers.”

In a flash, I roll to hover above her, legs on either side of hers, and stare into her dark eyes, hoping she can see just how serious I am. “No. I’m fucking yours.”

Chapter 12

Wren

The gravelly rumble of Oliver's declaration causes giddiness and glee to spin inside of me. I open my mouth to respond when his lips cover mine, stealing my words.

He kisses me. Long and deep and urgent. I pull him closer, wholeheartedly craving all of him. This is why things have been so hard lately.

There's not enough of this.

Oliver and me.

Alone.

His hand moves to my jaw, holding me in place for a beat or two longer. Then his lips lower to tease a strip of my neck. His hot tongue licks at my skin, then sucks it into his mouth and I gasp. Tingling sensations of pleasure shoot through my veins.

Not wanting to give in too soon, too fast, I pull away slightly. It would be so easy to let Oliver have me, and I'd enjoy every second of his hands on me, lips devouring me. But not yet.

Looking up at him, I'm unable to read anything but desire and truth in his features. He wants me as much as I want him. He hates every second of this hiding and being apart. And this right here, the way he's looking at me, is enough to soothe some of the doubt breeding within me.

It isn't enough to keep me from asking, "Are you mine? It's hard to remember that when days go by without seeing each other. Our daily texts and calls aren't enough."

"I agree." He lowers his body so every inch of him presses into me. The hard length of him rubs along the apex of my thighs and I whimper, not sure how long I can hold out.

He moans, "God, I've missed you."

I haven't had him inside me since the gym. I can't count how many times I regretted not sleeping with him that first night here, in my home. I loved every second of what we did, and still I ache for him.

In the darkest moments of doubt, I sometimes wondered if the gym was to be our first and last time. But no. Tonight? Nothing will stop me from going all the way with him. Nothing.

"What are you going to do about it?" I buck my hips against his erection.

"Jesus." He tilts his head back and stills, every muscle tight, as if any kind of movement might cause him to lose control.

My hand travels down his hard chest, wedging between our bodies until I palm his hardening cock. He hisses out a breath and, like a striking cobra, traps my bottom lip between his teeth, deliciously animalistic and raw.

His immediate and visceral reaction only incites me to stroke and squeeze his solid length through the cotton of his boxers. "These have to go."

With his teeth, he nips at my pajama top, biting it, and mouths through the flannel. "You first."

I laugh, and within seconds we're both naked, in the dark. I break our kiss and fumble for the light switch. He grabs for me and his fingers lightly graze my arm, but I'm just out of reach.

"What are—" His hurried words die on his tongue when the warm yellow glow of the lamp fills the room.

Turning to face him, my breath catches at the way his usually light hazel eyes darken and simmer. His hungry gaze dips to trace every line, curve, and valley of my body.

“Dammit, Tyler, look at you...” His long fingers curl around the nape of my neck, and he possessively drags me up to meet his lips.

The fire of want for this man rages hot, nearly uncontrollable, inside me. While I’m getting off on his unabashed appreciation of my body, a small part of me suddenly feels self-conscious. The gym was pitch black, and even on the balcony, the night sky was all we had to light our adventures. Suddenly I’m very aware of just how much of me—every inch—he can see.

Sure, he’s naked too, and with that, it would appear we’re on equal footing. Except Oliver is masculine perfection. Broad shoulders, defined muscles, narrow waist, and magnificent cock. Not to mention his kind heart, wicked sense of humor, and sharp mind. This man is all that and then some.

As if he can read my mind, he gifts me a rakish smile and shakes his head, tsking out loud. His full weight presses into me and it’s glorious. “Pardon me for stating the obvious. Wren, you’re gorgeous. Sexy as sin.”

With one swift pull, our chests collide and his mouth covers mine. Every dart of his tongue and tease of his teeth, scraping my lower lip, makes quick work of erasing any and all of my doubts.

Unmistakably done with conversation, Oliver rolls us until I’m on top. He positions me on his lap, straddling him, as he resumes his torturous exploration of my mouth. Every swipe of his tongue, press of his lips, urges me to kiss back, to take and to feast on him.

Large, warm hands grab my ass, grasping hard and strong as I rock on his long, thick erection. He makes me pant and moan for more when his mouth and tongue move from my mouth to kiss, stroke, and suck on one nipple and then the other.

I love the way he touches me, like I'm to be cherished and worshipped, like he can't get enough of me.

Oliver breaks contact just far enough to whisper against my lips, "Tyler, I've missed you."

A giggle sails past my sure-to-be swollen lips. "You've already said that."

"Yeah. Our time apart has felt like years." He dips a hand between my thighs.

Shamelessly, I widen my stance, knees pressing into the mattress on either side of his legs to give him better access. He finds me hot and wet before even parting my folds.

"What about you, Tyler?" His fingers glide through my arousal and stop short of where I need him.

My chest heaves, gaze fixed on his immobile hand. His fingers perch over my swollen clit, teasing in their promise.

"What about me?"

He chuckles at the desperation in my voice.

"Tell me, did you miss me?" The hint of vulnerability in his voice hits.

He's trying to be playful and sexy, but his question is a real one.

A real need.

Why didn't I tell him sooner?

"God, Oliver, of course I missed you."

He smiles, the tight lines around his eyes softening and fading. He kisses me and gently nudges my clit. But it's featherlight and over way too fast. His fingers are now motionless and not where they should be.

"Oliver." My nails dig into his shoulder, hips rocking, trying to get him where I want him. He only chuckles, evading any connection.

Through his black-as-coal lashes, his gaze flicks up to mine and he wets his lips. "What is it, Wren? What do you

want?”

Needy and single-minded, I try to conjure the words. It's simple really. Tell him what I want.

But I'm operating on basic needs and instincts, not able to think logically. Then his tongue flicks out between his lips, probably for another sweep, and for now I'm distracted by the next shiny thing. Or in this case, wet, pink thing.

I'm quick, all action with no words or sound. I dive in, mouth sucking on the tip of his tongue, thoroughly enjoying his teasing. Two can play this game.

My fingers wrap in a tight fist around his hard cock, stroking his tip fast. His crown pulses, slick with pre-cum, and air catches in his throat. His incapacitation does something to me, and like the biting point of a knife, my world shrinks to a single purpose.

“I want you,” I breathe against his mouth. “I want you to make love to me.”

His strong hands grip my waist and raise me above him to line me up with his cock. I whimper and nod, wholly on board with where things are going. *Finally.*

His thick head glides through my heat, nudging my entrance, and with a hard flex of his hips, he buries his dick deep inside of me.

We fit together like yin and yang. Whole. Each of us only belonging in one place. Here and now with each other.

He fills me, fully and completely, and as I arch my back for him, my hips piston down to pull him impossibly deeper inside me. Our mutual want resides in the calls of our names, the breathless moans and mewls for more, and resonates in every tremor rocking through my body.

I grab my breasts and squeeze them together, serving them up to him like dessert, and he greedily consumes me, licking, biting, and lapping.

The thundering beats of my heart slam into my rib cage with every one of his upward thrusts. My hands latch onto his

face, bringing his gaze to meet mine, as my fingernails scrape along his stubbled jaw.

“Yes. This is what I’ve wanted for so long. Yes. You. Oliver.”

His bruising kiss steals the breath from my lungs, and I’d willingly die like this. Give my last breath to have him burrowed so deep inside me, neither of us knowing nor caring where he begins and I end.

For Oliver to take. For me to give all of me to him.

The kiss morphs into gentle sweeps of our tongues and mouths, neither of us stopping or breaking our entanglement. With every stroke and thrust of his cock, Oliver shows me how much he loves me, how long he’s waited for this.

He pulls nearly all the way out until only the tip of his cock stretches my throbbing pussy. Then he pushes back inside with one quick thrust. Our pleased groans cry out in tandem when his second push is followed by a third and then a fourth just as fast.

The set pace is frenetic. We kiss and kiss and kiss until we are both pulling away for air. My lungs ache with the introduction of fresh air, but I only get a gulp before Oliver is on me again.

He swallows my breathy sighs and pleased moans with his mouth and tongue, his cock doing the same to my pussy. I pull my lips from his, teeth nipping at his earlobe, and his soft chuckle melts into a low, sexy moan.

Suddenly, as if a lit match strikes dry straw, Oliver rages wildly. His cock plunges into me, mouth tracing the curve of my neck and the slick skin of my trembling jaw.

My thigh muscles shake, and I’m about to explode into a million pieces.

“Oliver, I’m close.”

His fingers dig into the nape of my neck, warm breath skating over my ear. “Give it to me, Wren.”

I throw my head back, delighting in how he clings to me, his touch everywhere. Every merciless stroke is deeper and harder than the one before, and I cry out his name as we both barrel toward climax.

Afterward, we clean up in the bathroom and then he gets some water from the kitchen. As he enters the room, I press a knee into the mattress, ready for bed, and his fingers encircle my ankle to stop me from going any farther.

I peer over my shoulder at him and arch a brow. He studies me for what feels like forever, still naked, ass in the air. “Let’s sleep outside again.”

“It’s chilly out there.” I snag my discarded pajama top and slide it on, already feeling the cool air in my bones but knowing I’ll give in if that’s what he wants.

I love that, like me, he cherishes our childhood memories of the treehouse and wants to recreate them now.

His hand sweeps slow and soothing up my bare thigh, and he bends over me until our lips are inches apart. “I want you under the stars.”

Chapter 13

Oliver

I plunder Wren's mouth, the sweet taste of her sending a warm humming throughout my body. My hands tangle in her hair, the very distraction that started this spontaneous make-out session.

Not even ten minutes ago, I got a cryptic text from her to go to the storage room at the back of the Nest. There, I found her perched on a table, happily swinging her legs back and forth with a sly smile. She snuck in the back on her lunch break.

We are supposed to be talking; that's supposedly why she came over. But one look at her cascading red hair and my hands itched to touch those silky locks. To smell her fresh floral fragrance. I can't stay away. A touch led to a caress then a hug, and once we started kissing, it was game over.

Grudgingly, I break the kiss on a groan. My feet shuffle a few steps back and my fingers touch my lips. My tongue peeks out to taste the remnants of her on my mouth. God, it's hard to stay away from her.

"What are you doing all the way over there?" She crooks a finger, motioning me to her, and gives me what should be a lethal "come hither" look.

"Uh-uh." I chuckle and interlace my fingers at the nape of my neck. I'm determined to keep my distance. Keep my wits about me. "I thought you said you only had a few minutes."

"You know, if I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to get rid of me. You're going to give me a complex."

She hops off the table and mock pouts, fluttering her ginger eyelashes. “And to think of all the planning and risks I took to pull this off. And what for? You don’t even want me.”

Her words are like a magnet, drawing me to her without any thought as to why I shouldn’t move.

“No way. Never. I want you.” My arms wrap around her waist and pull her to me until not even a slip of paper could come between us. “Always want you.”

“That’s better.” In a move that surprises me, she hooks a leg around my thigh. “I’ve got you where I want you.”

“Tyler, you’re killing me here.” I tip my head back and will my hardening cock down.

She giggles and drops her leg, but luckily she doesn’t attempt to slip out of my grip. Thank fuck for small mercies. Leaning her lower back into my interlocked hands, she separates her upper half from mine, far enough for her fingers to trace the ridges of my chest muscles through my cotton shirt.

Her touch is fire and my skin burns.

“Wren.” The caution in my voice gives her pause, and I lean forward to kiss the tip of her nose. “How’s your day going?”

She exhales on a huff. “Fine. No more kissing. I’ll try to be good. My day’s good. I forgot to tell you, I might end up staying at my dad’s tonight. A bunch of us are meeting at the Grill tonight to plan next week’s fundraiser for Bright Horizons.”

“Really? You heard from the mayor?” It’s only been a few hours since we last spoke, this morning when I slipped out of her bed, and I want all the details. It sounds like a lot has happened since then.

“Nope. Still nothing. But even if we don’t get approval, the program needs funds.” She injects as much optimism as possible into her voice.

Last night, under the covers after making love, sated and sleepy, she admitted how she's trying to be less anxious about the thunderous silence from the city council on the Bright Horizons program.

I hook an arm around her waist and drag her into my side where she readily rests her head on my chest. My head dips and my mouth nears her ear. "I don't suppose I could sneak into Pop's tonight?"

It's a joke. As much as I want to spend every second with her, I wouldn't disrespect Pop that way. If I'm staying over, he's aware of it and I'm walking in through the front door.

Laughing, she shakes her head. "Not a good idea. Sometimes Pop insists I stay over at his place just because. But if I get out of it and can head home, I'll text you."

"Sounds good."

She tilts her head back to look at me and bites her bottom lip in a maddeningly sexy and teasing way.

My dick strains against the front of my jeans, and things get more uncomfortable when she says, voice as warm as sunshine, "Kiss me, Twist."

Anticipation and excitement whizz through me followed by the buzz of nerves. I want nothing more than to take her here, in the back of my place of business—this is what fantasies are made of—but I can't.

Dot will be here any minute now.

I barely recognize my voice, coarse and needy. "Fuck." I press my forehead against hers. "You have to go."

Those four little words are the hardest I've ever had to say.

Wren leaving is the last thing I want.

She solemnly nods and tries to wrestle from my one-arm hold. Before she does, once more, I lean down, lips skating across the shell of her ear. "Make sure you go home tonight. I've got plans for you."

My lips press at the soft spot behind her ear and linger for way longer than is necessary. I can't get enough of her.

She shivers. A hot flush works its way up her neck and face. Boy, what I'd give to see just how far her blush has spread.

Over her perfect tits?

Her flat stomach?

Her sweet pussy?

Damn.

She leaves my embrace and strolls over to the table to grab her purse. "Are you sure you want to confront Dot?"

Her quiet concern takes up the vast space between us. We talked about this last night and even then, when I first floated the idea by her, she didn't like it.

She shuffles on the spot awkwardly, a frown fixed to her features. "What about the Nest? You don't want to make her suspicious."

I hate that I'm the cause for her unease. All of this is because of me. I'm also tired of doing nothing.

It has been four days since I spent that first night at her house—I had the best sleep of my life—and Dot's still perpetuating the lie about the baby. She refuses to talk to me.

The good news is, Wren and I are in a better place. We not only text hourly and call when we can, I've also spent every night at her house. Once Eddie goes to bed, which is usually close to midnight, I slip out and let myself into her place. The same goes for the mornings. I'm usually out of her bed by four thirty with just enough time to hop into mine before Eddie's up at five.

I could tell him the truth; he wouldn't care. In fact, he would likely support it, but the fewer people who know, the better.

"I'm tired of this limbo. I have to try to reason with her, and I won't tip my hand about the Mercury deal." I blow out a

breath, already anxious to face my ex. It's never easy. "I'm also going to talk to her about the baby."

"I get it. I feel the same way. Just don't get your hopes up." Her slender fingers curl around my wrist and she lightly squeezes. "After all, this is Dot we're talking about."

The familiar crunch of tires on the gravel parking lot out front causes both of us to stiffen.

"Shit." Wren scurries to the back door.

"Wait." I jog from the storage room and glance out the side window. Dot is parking her car.

"Tyler, it's her. You better go." I race back to Wren and give her a quick kiss. "Love you."

"Okay. Call me when you can. Love you."

Wren slips out the back and I shut the door and walk to the front of the building. From there I watch Dot gather her purse and lock the car. She doesn't know I'm here.

According to the Winslow Nest calendar, I'm supposed to be at a trade show in Billings. The date for the show got moved, and I never bothered to update the Nest calendar. I wanted to catch Dot unaware.

Her avoidance of me has forced my hand. This was the only way to get in front of her. To make her talk to me.

She walks in and freezes midstep at the sight of me. "Oliver, what the hell are you doing here? And why are you hiding in the corner like a serial killer."

Hiking her bag up her shoulder, she glares, and her painted lips twist into an ugly smear of red.

"You wouldn't talk to me." I shrug, letting her know I have every right to be here. "I knew you'd be in today."

She gapes, eyes widening to the size of saucers, and I see when it hits her. When she figures out I set her up—or that's how she'd see it. Within seconds, her surprised expression shifts into downright mad. Nostrils flaring.

Shit, maybe I shouldn't have played it like this. Dot doesn't like others to get the upper hand. Although, truth be told, she's still in the driver's seat.

"What about the trade show? You just blew that off. That's really stupid, Oliver. We could use—"

"I didn't. They postponed it. Listen, speaking of business, I've got the papers here for you to sign." I decided things might go smoother if I gave her the documents instead of my lawyer.

She looks at them and then me like I'm holding a steaming pile of shit. "What are those for?" Shaking her head contemptuously, she marches away from me and drops her things onto the desk. "I'm not signing anything."

"We already talked about this, several times over the past couple of years. I'm buying you out. You agreed."

While I don't have the money now, Eddie and I have talked, and he's all for me cutting Dot loose from my life. So much so, he offered me a short-term loan. I didn't even have to ask, not that I was going to.

When I told him in more detail about Dot's hold on the business, the Netherlands deal, and my plan, he practically threw the money at me.

"I didn't agree to anything. Besides, now isn't the time for this nonsense." She waves her hand as if it's that easy to erase me and my wishes. "Everything has changed. We're having a baby."

"The baby isn't mine, for fucks' sake." I slam my fist into the wooden wall and we both flinch.

The wood creaks, wall rattling, and my skin splits on a knuckle, blood oozing. I grab a napkin from a drawer to stanch the bleeding, and my throat tightens around my frustration.

I have to rein it in. I don't have outbursts or lose my cool. That isn't me. But this situation is getting to me.

Wren is all I want.

All I've ever wanted.

And right now, I'm staring at the only thing standing in our way.

Head pounding, I rub at my temples and steady my voice. "Heck, you most probably aren't even pregnant."

She rears back as if I hit her. "Oliver, you need to calm down. You're scaring me and the baby." Her hand rests protectively on her belly and I scoff, done with her theatrics.

"Dot, cut it out. We're the only ones here and I can't be fooled." My chest burns with outrage. "Listen, I'm prepared to buy out your half of the Nest at a very generous price. More than it's worth."

I thrust the papers at her, and like I hoped, she takes them. If I know anything about this woman, she can't resist being in the know. She wants to know the terms, what I'm willing to offer.

When she gets to page two, where it mentions the purchase price, she pauses, and oh, what I'd do to hear her thoughts.

Breath trapped in my lungs, I hope against all the odds that the money will be enough to make her change her mind. In reality, my chances are slim to none.

Dot doesn't need the money, although it's always nice to have. While she only has what she brought into our relationship and half of the Nest, her parents are wealthy and her father is incapable of saying no to his only child.

She flips through the remaining pages far too quickly for any comprehension and then drops them onto the counter. "No. This is my business too, and we're in this together. We're about to start a family. Why are you doing this?"

"That's it." I grab the papers and stride to the exit, pausing with my hand on the doorknob to glance back at her. "Your time is running out to tell the town the truth about the baby."

I would love to drop Kellen's name right about now and spell out for her our hunch—that he's the father—but I don't.

Wren and I also talked about this last night. For now, with the fate of Bright Horizons still hanging in the balance and

things still pending on my business deal, we can't afford to poke the bear any more than this little visit might have.

"You'll what?" She practically lances me with the question like she's thrown a knife at me and doesn't give me a chance to answer. "You'll do nothing. We both know it."

She cocks a hip as if she doesn't have a care in the world. "I could easily tarnish, or better yet, destroy the legacy of the Winslows with a few choice words. I wouldn't even have to remind Daddy of his idea to change the town name. There would be an outcry all over town to banish the Winslow name."

While she knows all too well how important it is to me and my dead father to protect the Winslow reputation at all costs, I'm not following.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You see, what my daddy failed to mention when he suggested a town name change was that there's evidence to suggest Merrick Winslow, your pompous father, misappropriated town funds for his own personal gains."

"Bullshit." I lunge forward but stop myself, blood boiling. "Is there no limit to how low you'll stoop?"

She cackles and grins wickedly. "I'm not making it up. Shit, I doubt even I would've thought to spread such a dirty and vicious rumor about your father. Like they say, real life is often better than fiction."

Sweat breaks out on the back of my neck. Not because I believe her—my father would never. Even though the way she talks about him is a little too close to what Eddie thinks of our father. My brother never did spell out why he thought my father was a hypocrite.

"What? Nothing to say, Oliver?" Her smug smile grows with each second that ticks by. "Your father used town funds for prostitutes and gambling. Some of his cronies are still around. I'm sure, if push came to shove, they'd spill every gory detail to save their own hides. You see, I have got you right where I want you."

This can't be true. My legs shake and black spots dance in my vision. My father was an upstanding man. I looked up to him, tried to please him even if I never quite did.

Fuck, Eddie—does he know? Our father had nothing but disparaging comments about his eldest son. He never wanted me to talk to Eddie or hang out with him.

I never understood why. Was it because Eddie knew and Dad feared he'd tell me or Mom?

Dot's sinister laughter wrenches me from my sickening thoughts. The woman is loving every bit of this.

"Why are you doing this?" Even as I ask the question, I realize it's senseless. She is pure evil. "You can't possibly want to marry me. We don't love each other."

Fists clenched at her sides, she bristles but catches herself and juts out her chin. "Let's get one thing straight, Oliver. I was never going to let you go. Never. And if you keep trying to end things and get together with that pathetic Wren Tyler, I'll not only destroy the Winslow name, but I'll also take the Nest from you. We both know my father will back me on all of this."

Dot leaves and I stand there, shaken and defeated. I haven't succeeded in getting her to sign the papers or admit that I'm not the father of her unborn child. Instead, I attempted battle with the executioner and lost. Dot's threat hangs ever present between us like a noose around my neck.

Chapter 14

Wren

“**T**hank you, Serena.” I hand her change and Jack places her recently purchased baked goods in front of her.

“Wren, I should be thanking you.” The blonde grins and pockets her money. “What you’re doing here, for Court and the guys.” She pauses to flash Jack a quick grin. “And all the future kids. I can’t thank you enough for creating this program.”

Reggie appears at my side with a fresh tray of brownies in hand. The aroma is to die for, and Jack grunts like a starving animal and tries to take one.

She lightly slaps his hand. “Uh-uh. Those aren’t for you.” Then she glances up at the woman on the other side of the table. “Serena, darling, you’re helping too. Volunteering when you can, buying things.”

Serena utters a halfhearted laugh. “Sure, but the program is a brilliant idea and it’ll really help. Why didn’t I think of something like that?”

Her once foster mom huffs. “You do what you can, young lady.”

Nodding, Serena looks to me once more. “Seriously, Wren, thank you. Please let me know how I can help. In any way.”

At her side, Percy groans, an over-the-top groan that holds no frustration to it. It’s only for show. “Serena, stop. My sister doesn’t need to hear how great she is. She gets enough of that from everyone else. Please, not you too.”

Percy's joking, and even as her best friend chides, my sister sticks out her tongue at me. Caught up in the moment, I do the same, completely ignoring the fact that we're in the library turned makeshift fundraiser bake sale with a line out the door.

As luck would have it, that's when deep rumbly laughter from the end of the checkout table causes all four of us, plus a few people in the line, to swing our heads toward the attractive sound.

In jeans and a black cotton button-down, Jett Kincaide grins wickedly at us and tips the rim of his hat. "Ladies." Then his gaze lands on me. "Wren, I'm glad I decided not to call ahead. If I had, I might've missed out on you misbehavin'."

His tongue darts out quickly and then he turns up the wattage on his sinfully naughty smile. Several women in the line giggle like he's just propositioned them.

"Me, misbehaving? Hardly." I roll my eyes and mock huff, but to anyone watching our exchange, it's plain to see I'm playing on account of the silly smile plastered on my face.

Jett Kincaide, a rodeo headliner and my ex-boyfriend, never had a problem drawing attention. Men and women alike swoon over him. He's definitely a crowd pleaser.

But what's he doing here? While he only lives about forty minutes away in the nearby town of Prospect, we don't talk all that often. Our relationship was short-lived, a handful of dates at the most, and even though I'd say we are friends, neither of us seek the other out. It's more we're friendly when our paths cross, which is few and far between.

"Jack, Reggie, you good to handle things for a few minutes?" I take off my apron and stash it under the counter.

"Sure thing, Miss Wren." Jack then calls to the next person in line, and as I walk toward Jett, Reggie echoes a similar sentiment.

"Uh, Wren, what are you doing with Jett?" Percy stops me with a harsh tug on my arm. "Why is he here?"

“That’s what I’m going to find out.” I try to yank myself free from her grasp, but she’s got a strong hold on me. “Perce, let me go. We’ll talk later.”

She steps close so no one else can hear. “Just so you know, everyone’s watching. And don’t forget...” Percy looks me in the eye, gaze piercing. “Oliver.”

I release a long-exaggerated sigh, as if I’d forget Oliver. I don’t like what she’s insinuating, and clearly she’s forgotten that Jett and I dated once, quite a while ago, and it quickly fizzled out. We’re only friends.

Even so, she isn’t overstating that practically all eyes are on us, or more like on him. Jett’s somewhat of a celebrity, rodeo aside, as he comes from a wealthy and powerful family around these parts.

Finally, Percy mutters something and releases me. Together with Serena, she leaves the library with their bake sale purchases.

Jett pulls me in for a hug while I ask, “What are you doing here?”

“Nice to see you too, sweetheart.”

“Forgive me and my manners; I didn’t mean it to sound like that. It’s always great to see you. It’s been a while. What’s brought you to Winslow Grove and better yet, this fundraiser?”

“Well, I do love Mrs. Parker’s brownies.” He licks his lips and casts a glance at the quickly dwindling tray of said brownies. “Shoot, I don’t suppose there’s any way you’d let me jump the line or put a few of those aside for me?” He pats his pocket. “I’m good for it. Promise.”

Snorting, I pull him by his sleeve away from the crowd and gawkers, as well as out of earshot. “Don’t worry your pretty little head. There’s more where they came from. Mrs. Parker has donated a bottomless supply of brownies. You’ll get some. Now tell me, how are you and why are you really here?”

I can't put my finger on it, but something tells me Jett didn't come all this way for only the brownies. And even still, if he did, why now and why show up at the library? If he was really here for the chocolatey goodness, he'd have gone to Beyond the Cake where he can get them any time.

"I find it hilarious that you're having a hard time with the idea that I'm simply dropping in to say hello."

Folding my arms, I keep my gaze focused on him while trying not to say a word. All I had to do was wait him out. Jett's a talker, and give him a breath or two and he'll fill the silence.

"Fine. Word got out that you're the mastermind behind a new fan-dangled program." He hooks his fingers into his pant loops and rocks back on his heels. "You've created quite a stir in Prospect, even Helena."

This could be a good sign; word is spreading to other towns. Does this mean the city council are talking about the program? They wouldn't do that if they planned to reject it.

Curiosity piqued, I raise a brow. "Oh, have I? This still doesn't explain why you're here and why Bright Horizons interests you. Last I heard, you weren't a foster kid."

This time, he cocks his head back and belts out a laugh that once more causes far too many intense stares at us. That's when I notice him.

Oliver stands in the line with his gaze fixed on Jett and me huddled in the corner like we're whispering secrets. I hope he doesn't get the wrong idea. I could call him over, but the men don't really know each other, and the entire town isn't supposed to know anything is going on between us. For the past several years, we've been merely acquaintances.

Something has been off about Oliver for the past several days. We still spend most nights together, although he has been withdrawn. I haven't pushed, chalking up his behavior to our situation. This sneaking around, holding our breath while Dot toys with us, is exhausting and disturbing.

While he was vague about how his talk went with her last week, I could tell from his demeanor that it had been useless. She refuses like always, and we're still stuck together, but apart.

Jett calls my name and it snaps me out of my wonderings. I blink up at him. "Sorry, what did you say?"

He examines me like he'll be quizzed later on how many freckles I have, and it causes me to squirm. Slowly, or is it reluctantly, he looks away from me to cast a glance over his shoulder. Most probably to see what had my attention.

Only it isn't just a glance. For far too long, Jett's fixed on Oliver, or at least that's how it looks from where I'm standing.

The men lock gazes for what feels like a millennium, and when Jett finally swings back to face me, his lips twitch in an annoying, "I know your secret" kind of way. He can't possibly know Oliver and I are together.

Suddenly, it's hot and suffocating in here, and I want to run outside, take a large gulp of the autumn air, and maybe stay out there until both Jett and Oliver leave.

"So, why's Winslow glaring at me like he wants me six feet under?"

"What?" I bark out a laugh and cringe at how much it sounds like a duck honk. "I don't know."

I shrug, trying to play it off, but the gesture is an epic fail. I'm stiff and awkward and end up feeling and definitely looking guilty.

"Sure." Now his lip twitch becomes a full-on smile. "Anyway, I came for the brownies and to tell you I'm impressed with what I'm hearing about this program of yours. I think it's a great idea and I'd like to help."

"Help?"

"Well, I can't make any promises. I have to talk to my family, and I have to warn you, nothing moves quickly when all my brothers and sisters get involved. Seriously, they can't

even agree on the sky being blue.” He grins down at me and I’m confused.

“I’m sorry. What do you mean by help?”

“Well, I can’t say how exactly. Not until I’ve talked to my family. We’ll figure something out.” He shamelessly winks.

“This is great.” I jump on the spot, excited at the idea of more support for the program.

“Hell, yeah.” He lifts me off the ground and twirls me around.

“Jett, put me down.” I playfully bat his shoulder and he obliges. “Thank you for even exploring this.”

“Don’t get too far ahead of yourself. I haven’t done anything yet. I’ll be in touch.”

We chat for a few more minutes and then Jett makes a comment about having to go, but not before I hustle to the kitchen to grab him some brownies. As Jett leaves, I spy Oliver lingering by the door. He catches my eye and juts out his chin in the direction of outside. We haven’t done this before—meet in broad daylight with half the town mingling about. Is he crazy?

I wait a few minutes and slip outside before Reggie or Jack can spy me. It takes several more minutes for me to spot Oliver in the back yard, near the shed door. Once I’m close, he pulls me inside with him.

“Oliver, what are you doing? Anyone could see us. Half the town’s out.”

It’s dark and dank inside the shed. This is where I keep the library’s meager gardening supplies, and except for a handful of times throughout the year, I never go in here.

Before I can say another word, his mouth covers mine in a searing, desperate kiss. And that’s all it takes for me to forget where I am and why being in this shed with him is a terrible idea. His hands latch on to my hips and pull me flush against his solid body.

Oliver pulls away first and rests his forehead on mine. “Hi.”

“Um, hi.” I entwine my fingers around his neck. “What are we doing in here?”

“Saw you and Jett Kincaide talking for some time. What did he want?”

Okay, so he’s choosing to ignore my question, and it’s plain to see where his head is at.

“Is that why you pulled me in here?”

“Nope. I wanted to kiss you.” He kisses the tip of my nose.

While the light in here is almost nonexistent, slowly I make out more and more of our surroundings. Most of his features are visible. The muscle in his jaw ticks, his face tense and all sharp angles.

I quickly fill him in on my conversation with Jett. He nods and his happy façade slips, revealing a fraction of a grimace. “That’s really cool of Jett.”

“It is?” Tilting my head to one side, I study him with a small smile playing on my lips. “That hurt to say out loud, didn’t it? Was it like eating glass?”

He snorts and nods. “Kind of.”

“Well, thank you for recognizing the gesture for what it is. He wants to help, and if he can, that will be a good thing for the program.”

His fingers dig in to my waist. “Absolutely. And you know, once things are settled with the Nest, I’d be more than willing to support Bright Horizons in any way I can.”

“Oliver, I know.” At the back of his neck, I run the tips of my fingers along the ridge of his shirt collar. “I hope you know that you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“What?” He almost pulls it off, as if he doesn’t understand what I’m talking about, but the slight edge to that one word gives him away.

“Oliver, are you jealous?”

“What? No. I’m only saying—”

“Hey, it’s all right and I appreciate any and all the support you have to give. Just listening to me vent about this never-ending wait or what keeps me up at night, all of it means everything to me. Thank you.” My lips press against his for a quick kiss. “It’s really cute that you think you have to compete with Jett Kincaide. There’s no competition—”

“I’m not.” He pauses and cocks his head to one side as the last words I said before he cut me off sink in. “What do you mean no competition?”

I sense his displeasure, even trepidation in how his body coils tight as he tries to pull back ever so slightly. But I don’t let him. I hold on and stare up at him.

Slowly, I enunciate each and every word so there’s no room for doubt or miscommunication. “Just so you know, no matter the competition or comparison, you, Oliver Winslow, will win every time.”

Chapter 15

Oliver

Wren hugs her father just steps from the exit to the Grill. From where I'm sitting in a booth, I can see her face clearly and have been watching her for the past several minutes.

Her eyes are closed and lips curled up in pure happiness. She's such a beautiful sight. Before father and daughter break apart, her eyes burst open and zero in on me. She winks with an extra sparkle in her eye that's just for me. That right there, a brief look, is pretty much all the "hello" and "goodbye" I'll get.

My gut burns. I can't take much more of seeing Wren around town and not being able to *be* with her. It's driving me nuts. If yesterday was any indication, I'm close to the edge. I went to the bake sale to help raise funds for Bright Horizons. I'm Wren's biggest supporter and yet I can't shout it from the rooftops.

When I saw her whispering, smiling, and hugging Jett Kincaide, the green-eyed monster hijacked my soul. I don't get jealous. That isn't me.

I trust Wren with all that I am. I have nothing to worry about, and yet, a strange, feral possessiveness infiltrated my body. I wanted to kick Jett all the way back to Prospect. Even when she told me he was offering support to Bright Horizons, I had to squash the urge to tell him to back off.

Add in the news about my father and Dot's threat to expose him and I'm off balance and overwhelmed with utter

helplessness.

I haven't told Wren any of this, not yet. There isn't any point when it'll only add to her stress, and it doesn't change anything. Besides, I have to talk to Eddie first, find out what he knows. He has been at his cabin fishing and is finally back in town.

Pop's deep voice as he approaches my table cuts through my troubles. "Oliver, what'll it be?"

"Hey. I'm waiting on Maddox so I'm good for now." My fingers drum a hurried beat on the table, nerves humming through me.

Since helping him with the treehouse, I've been to the Grill nearly every day. Pop and I are now on solid ground. He doesn't like the sneaking around with his daughter, but like he said from the beginning, this isn't his business.

"You mean Hartley? He's in town?"

"Yeah. He's back for Katie Rae's wedding. We're heading over to Eddie's garage to loan him a car while he's here."

Nodding, he turns and stops. "I know I said I'd stay out of this. My daughter's a grown woman and makes her own choices, but don't you think this has gone on too long?"

I shift uncomfortably in my seat. "It has and I hate every minute of it. I'm trying to move things as fast as I can."

"How are you going to fix this?"

What "this" is he talking about? There are so many things coming at us right now—the baby, trying to get back my business, and now the nasty truth about my father. Dot's right—forget the mayor wanting a town name change; everyone will want one if the truth comes out about Merrick Winslow.

"I'm trying, Pop."

His head tilts to one side in contemplation, expression more sympathetic than anything else when Maddox Hartley claps the old man on the shoulder.

"Pop." Mad pulls him in for a bear hug.

The two chuckle and slap each other on the backs as I get up to greet him. I can't believe my best friend has finally come home after all these years. As I move in for a one-armed hug, Pop makes his excuses and leaves us.

"Mad, you're looking good." I slide into the booth and he does the same across the table.

"You too, bro." The sleeves of his leather jacket lean against the table and he grins at me.

"I can hardly believe you're here. I seriously thought you were going to bail." He's done it before. There were at least three or four times where he would text that he was coming home and wouldn't show for whatever reason. They always felt like excuses.

"Shut up. Katie's getting married. She's my little sister, bro. I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"I know and I don't care why you're here; it's just good to see you. Did Erica come with you?"

His eyes dart around the room. "Nah. It's good to see you too."

Okay, he doesn't want to talk about Erica. I tap the menu and look at him. "Do you want anything before we head over to the garage?"

"Nah, I'm good."

I drop a few dollars on the table to cover my coffee and tip and we leave.

As we walk, shoulder to shoulder along the sidewalk, I watch Maddox take in the town and ask, "Has the town changed to you?"

"Not really." Maddox shrugs and pulls his leather jacket tighter to ward off the wind. "Some things have but it's still the same great place."

I blow out a breath, still wrestling with the idea that all this could no longer be known as Winslow Grove. My home. My legacy. And why? Because of my hypocritical father. It's one

thing to battle Dot, a living, breathing she-witch, but it's something completely different and futile to battle a dead man.

"You okay?" Mad taps my side with his elbow.

"Yeah." I don't want to get into any of my mess with him. "How's racing? I saw that last race." I cringe and bite my tongue.

Why did I bring up a race where he crashed and burned?

Mad runs a hand through his dark hair and releases a dry laugh. "Yeah, fuck, what a nightmare. I'm actually, ah..." He glances around Main Street and I get the feeling he'll look anywhere but at me. "I'm thinking of sticking around... permanently."

"No shit? But what about racing?"

"I dunno." He shrugs yet there's nothing relaxed or nonchalant about it. "So tell me, what's new with you? Tell me you finally ditched Dot and went after Wren. You know, if not, if you're still too dumb to make a move, maybe I will. Is she single?"

I shudder at his teasing laugh. Although he's joking, only trying to get a rise out of me by mentioning Wren, I don't like it. Not one bit.

Wren would be better off with the likes of Jett, Mad, and any number of men. Guys that don't have a wildly intense ex-girlfriend trying to destroy both our lives.

"Shut up." I turn the corner and exhale a sigh of relief at seeing the garage and, more importantly, Eddie's car in the lot. I need to talk to him.

Once Maddox has talked with my brother a bit and taken the loaner car, it's just Eddie and me.

"Hey, you got a sec?" I follow Eddie into his office where he deposits the stack of keys he just went through to find the right ones for Maddox.

"Uh-huh. What's up?"

“While you were away, I tried to nudge Dot, get her to sign the papers giving me ownership of the Nest.”

He puts down the papers he was looking at, eyes now on me. “And? Did it work?”

“No. She threw down another threat. One that kinda threw me for a loop.” I perch on his desk, the words like rocks in my mouth, sharp and troublesome.

“What the hell did she do now?”

“She basically told me she has me where she wants me because she’s got evidence, or I should say, Bill Malone does, about our father taking town funds for his own use.”

Eddie scowls, studying me intently, and I bite out, “Aren’t you going to say anything? Or did you already fucking know?”

He nods and mashes his lips together, nostrils flaring. “Yeah, I tried to tell you in not so many words.”

Like a bullet, I shoot to my feet. “You should’ve fucking tried harder. Like just tell me. Why would you keep this from me?”

“Hey, you’re my little brother. For all of your life, you’ve worshipped a man who didn’t deserve your adoration or your love. I didn’t want to be the one to crush you.”

Some of the heat under my collar dissipates at Eddie’s admission, but his omission still stings.

“How did you find out?” I cross my arms over my chest.

“I didn’t know he was dipping into the town funds; that’s news to me. Although it doesn’t surprise me. Sounds about right for that bastard. I knew he was a cheating asshole who threw away money on women, booze, and gambling. He was nowhere close to all the things he claimed to be and expected us to be.” He clenches his jaw, eyes narrowing on a far-off point as if he’s in the past, maybe even face-to-face with our father. “My mother loved him, but she cried all the time. They’d have fights about his affairs, the prostitutes. When she died, while it killed me and I missed her, I was glad he

couldn't hurt her anymore. Then out of nowhere, he got engaged to Diana.”

Eddie looks at me now with a turbulent gaze, almost as if warring with himself about how much, if anything, he should tell me about my mother and her marriage to our father.

“Go on, Eddie. I need to know. All of it.”

“That’s when things changed for me. I confronted him and told him I’d tell Diana who he really was. She was new in town, hadn’t heard the rumors—you see, while Dot’s threatening you, back then, some people knew and others speculated.”

I get to my feet, a realization dawning. “Is that when he kicked you out?”

Eddie nods. “Yeah and cut me off. He said Diana wouldn’t believe me anyway. He tried to taint me in her eyes, but your mother didn’t go along with his lies. She knew who he was, and in some ways, she tamed him. Not fully, and maybe since he was getting up there in age, he didn’t wander or party like he once did.” He looks me in the eye with an admiration that fills my chest. “Your mother was good to me.”

“Yeah, Mom loved you like a son even if she wasn’t that much older than you.”

We both chuckle at that, even though it leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. “You should’ve told me. To hear it from Dot of all people and now have her fucking use it to keep me in line...”

My fist smacks against his desk. “I’m sick of this, Eddie. I deserve this shit, because I was stupid enough to get involved with Dot. But Wren... I hate that she has to go along with my bullshit.”

“Hey, you don’t deserve this. Dot’s a malicious person. Nobody deserves her. And as for Wren, she loves you. If you’re worried about her cutting you loose, she won’t.”

I scoff, wanting to believe him. “I hope not. I’m asking a lot of her.”

“Sure, but I bet she thinks you’re worth it. As for Dot, don’t let her lord this over you.”

“What the hell does that mean?” My snappish tone comes out harsher than I intend. It isn’t as easy as he makes it out to be.

Eddie’s features tense. “Who gives a fuck if she tells people about Merrick? The man is dead. We didn’t do the things he’s accused of. The rumors still exist in some circles, and no one”—he approaches, stopping about a foot in front of me—“I mean, *no one* looks down on us for his shit. We are both liked and respected. We treat people right, and for the most part, the town sees that.”

“But the town name—”

“Fuck that. If those assholes want to take away the name, let them.” He flings an arm into the air, and his indifference wounds me.

“No. I’ll fucking fight Dot and Malone and whoever else. I will not lose the Winslow Grove name. You may not care about our history, but I do. And even if Merrick was a lying, cheating excuse of a human”—I pause to catch my breath, realizing this is the first time I’ve called my father by his first name—“I’m proud of our family history, and those that came before Merrick did good for this town and for the people. That has to count for something.”

Suddenly sheepish, Eddie nods, eyes on the ground. “Shit, Oliver, you’re right. I’ll fight with you. You can count on me.”

Chapter 16

Wren

Ding. The bell chimes at the front desk of the library, and I hurriedly pour the last of the hot water for my tea.

From the kitchenette, I holler, “I’ll be there in a minute.”

Still scalding, I pick up my tea and blow on the tendrils of white air rising from the too full mug. Slowly, I sip to prevent the hot liquid from spilling as I make my way to the front. “Just give me one sec. I’ve got a huge cup of—”

I stop short of the desk at the sight of Eddie Winslow. While they only share a father, and Eddie’s many years older than Oliver at forty-eight with a head of white hair and a full beard, I can still see a resemblance.

Both men are good-looking in that outdoorsy, clean-living kind of way. Both are kind and caring though Eddie’s more reserved than his younger brother. They also share a similar jawline, strong and commanding, and both have warm gazes even if Eddie’s eyes are blue instead of hazel.

“Let me help.” Before I can protest, Eddie scoops up the books I’ve got tucked under my arm.

“Thank you. How are you?”

It has been a while since I last saw him. Although we weren’t estranged or avoiding each other like Oliver and I were, or more like I was the one doing the avoiding, my path rarely crosses with his. Unless I have car problems—Eddie owns the best garage in town—or we’re dining at the same

place, though he rarely eats out, we have no reason to run into each other.

He places the books down and turns to fully face me. “I’m good. It’s great to see you.”

“You too. Although I will admit, I’m kind of shocked to see you in the library of all places.” I hope my tone comes off as teasing and not condescending.

He isn’t a reader. For as long as I can remember, the man never sat still and was always doing something with his hands. Holding a book and reading was never one of those things. I still remember all those summers with Oliver when Eddie came to pick him up. I’d be on the dock, feet in the water, losing myself in a world of fantasy or romance, and Eddie would rib me about all the hours I was wasting away when I could be doing something.

“Yeah.” He peruses the library with a sly grin dancing on his lips. “So this is a library. Wow. Who knew there were this many books?”

I poke him in the rib. “Very funny. What can I do for you?”

He takes one more look around. “I don’t usually do this.”

“And what is that? Come to the library?”

“Yeah, that too. I don’t want to meddle, but I wanted to just check in on how things are going...” He glances around once more and lowers his voice. “With Oliver. I know he’s worried you’ll bail on him, especially with Dot’s latest threat.”

My shoulders rise and I can feel my frown forming. “What threat?”

“Uh, about our father.”

“What are you talking about?” A sinking sensation washes over me in warm waves.

“Shit. I thought Oliver told you.” His lips twist into a grim line. “I’m sure he planned to—”

“I’m sure he did.” I stand tall and hold his gaze, determined to get answers now. “Eddie, since you’ve brought

it up, please tell me.”

I don’t know what he’s going on about. If he was concerned enough to seek me out, I need to know.

What has Dot done now? And why didn’t Oliver tell me?

Before he can respond, Jack, Brayden, and Courtney, along with a few other high school kids, plow through the door, laughing and talking a mile a minute. All of them make a point to wave or offer some kind of hello to Eddie and me.

Jack strolls over to us and sheepishly smiles. “Hey, Miss Wren. Mr. Winslow.” He puts his hand out for Eddie to shake.

“Hey, Jack. Call me Eddie and it’s good to see you. Great game last Friday.”

Jack plays tight end on the varsity football team.

“Uh, thanks, Mr.—uh, Eddie.” The boy doesn’t know what to do with the compliment and blushes. “Um, Miss Wren, these guys won’t be here long.” He waves a hand at the group settling in. “I’ve got some homework, and as soon as I’m done, you can put me to work.”

“Sounds good. Take your time.”

When Jack strolls back to his friends, I open my mouth to resume my conversation with Eddie but snap it shut as Oliver enters the library. My heart thumps wildly in my chest, and I’m shocked to see who he’s with.

“No way.” I rush over to throw my arms around the tall, dark-haired man.

“Wren, hello.” Maddox envelops me in a big hug. Oliver’s tall at six three, but his friend still has a couple of inches on him. “You were always something but look at you. Fucking gorgeous.”

He glances to Oliver who’s smiling though somewhat tentative. We are in public after all. My body sways toward him, aching to be alone with him, to ask about what Eddie had started to tell me.

Maddox squeezes my waist affectionately. “Look at her.”

“I’m very aware how stunning Wren is.” Oliver good-naturedly takes his friend’s hand off me, our arms brush, and Mad laughs, clearly enjoying this.

“You stop. You always were a ladies’ man.” I step back to get a better look at Mad, now closer to Oliver. “Oh my God, look at you. As I live and breathe, it’s the infamous Maddox ‘The Mad One’ Hartley.”

He grimaces at my use of his racing moniker, the one that’s been aptly used far too much in the media to report on much more than just his racing career.

“Not you too. Forget all that.” He glances to the man standing slightly to one side. “Eddie, good to see you again.”

Oliver and I share a quiet moment. Like magnets, we’re drawn to each other. We move closer, both aware we aren’t alone and don’t want to make this too obvious. The backs of our hands touch and neither of us pull away.

Our gazes lock and in those brief beats, while Eddie and Maddox talk, Oliver curls his pinky around mine and holds tight. So much is said in the quiet moments, and without a doubt, I know he would’ve told me whatever this latest threat is from Dot.

He believes in us, and he had his reasons for waiting.

“You better not fuck up with this one. She’s as good as it gets.” Eddie hooks a thumb at me, speaking in hushed tones.

Oliver uncurls his finger from mine, taking two steps away, and just like that, the connection is broken. At Eddie’s comment, Maddox’s mouth gapes open. His keen eyes flick rapidly back and forth between Oliver and me like a hummingbird’s wings.

Before he can open his mouth and spill the beans, Oliver clamps a hand over his friend’s lips. “Don’t say a word. I’ll explain outside. Understand?” He waits for Mad to nod before releasing his hand. Then he looks to his brother. “I don’t intend to. She’s the best.”

Oliver’s eyes roam my face, lingering a little longer than is necessary on my mouth. My skin prickles and burns, and it’s

getting difficult to stand here and not combust.

The four of us chat for a few minutes, Eddie and I sharing a few awkward glances, then the men say they have to go. I want to demand that Oliver stay and talk to me, but I can't.

Eddie leans in for a hug goodbye and whispers in my ear, "Sorry. I'll tell him to talk to you. I'm sure he planned to and just doesn't want to lose you."

Then he leaves with Maddox and Oliver. I don't get a chance to process any of my brief chat with Eddie or even speculate before Lara Crandall slips inside the library. Wonderful. My good mood is about to dampen. The woman means well, or at least this is what I tell myself, but no conversation with her is very pleasant or easy.

Lara marches straight to me, face pinched. "Wren, a word."

"Oh, hi, Lara. How may I help you?" I put on my brightest smile, hoping a positive outlook will make this quick and painless. It's naïve of me, but one can hope.

"I'm quite concerned with what I'm hearing about Bright Horizons." She looks down her nose at me.

Now if that isn't vague and alarming. I try to get the words past the growing lump in my throat. "Sorry, what are you hearing?"

"That Bright Horizons is on shaky ground. It may not be approved by the city council. Something to do with misconduct or something...on your part."

No. Is Dot talking, spreading lies about me around town? Or did she get to her father? My insides coil tight, and my chest feels like it's about to burst open, the air filling my lungs trapped and expanding by the second.

"Lara, I haven't heard anything. I'm not sure what you're talking about. I wouldn't worry—"

"Excuse me?" She slaps a hand onto the counter. "If you don't think this is cause for concern then perhaps you shouldn't be the one running this program."

“But...” I snap my mouth shut even as my defensive words boil on my tongue.

I will not gain anything by sparring with Lara Crandall. Anything I say or do will be used against me, reshaped, and retold by this woman.

“Answer me this.” She squares her shoulders. “Has the city council approved the program?”

We both know the answer. She may even know more than I do about where things stand or the program’s chances with the council. Lara’s only making a point.

“No. It’s still with them for review.”

“Isn’t that what you’ve been saying for some time now?”

I don’t know how to get her to back off, short of telling her so, but every second I stand here, I grow more nauseous. Beads of sweat gather at the back of my neck and my hands tremble. First, the news of Dot laying down new threats, this time about Oliver’s father, and now this.

“Miss Wren.” Brayden, a stocky, muscled boy, slides out from behind Lara along with Jack and Courtney. “Is Bright Horizons not gonna happen?”

At some point while I was talking with Lara, the other kids left the library and only three remain. The very kids who stand to gain or lose so much depending on the approval of my program.

How much did they overhear?

If the town rejects the program, the family sponsorships are likely to fall apart.

“No. We don’t—”

“You children need to prepare yourself for the worst.” Lara Crandall walks past them toward the door and stops to look back at me pointedly. “All of you should.”

“What’s she talking about?” Courtney rushes to my side.

“She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.” Even as I say the words, I’m not so sure they’re the truth.

What if this is the end of the program? Something cracks inside my chest, a hot pulsing sears through me, and I'm sick to think all could be lost. These children might not get a chance at college. And why? Because I had to take on Dot Malone.

Chapter 17

Oliver

It's well after midnight when I slip into Wren's home. Usually, I would find her in bed but not tonight. After we left the library and Maddox went to his mom's house, Eddie told me about his visit to the library. That he'd gone to talk to Wren and never got a chance to explain things to her.

Despite my brother's aloof exterior, he cares. Initially, he may have acted like Dot's threat was no big deal, but his actions said otherwise. He went out of his way to find Wren. He wanted to make sure the added complication of Merrick Winslow's embezzlement wouldn't send her running.

Not long after leaving the library, as expected, Wren texted that we needed to talk. If I didn't know better, I'd have been worried.

Now at her house, many hours later, she's on the couch in her living room. Waiting for me.

"Sorry. I meant to get here earlier but Eddie and I ended up talking for a while." I shed my jacket. "I'm not going to waste any time. He meant well coming to see you, and since he wasn't able to tell you anything, it left you hanging. Let's talk now."

"Yes. Please."

I sit beside her and recount everything about Dot's latest warning and the dastardly deeds of my father, ending with my conversation with Eddie. I also explained how I intended to tell her after speaking with Eddie but also wanted to delay it. It was only one more problem for us to face.

“Oliver, I can’t imagine what you’re feeling. Forget about Dot lording this over you—that’s bad enough—but your father...” She frowns and takes my hand, likely thinking about all the times during our childhood when I lamented how I could never please my father no matter how hard I tried.

“It’s slowly sinking in. Sometimes I’m more hurt and disappointed than anything else and then...angry, you know. I did everything to please him and why? He wasn’t a good man. Certainly not someone you’d aspire to be like. And Eddie...his animosity toward our father—it all makes sense now. Our dad was so hard on him. Horrible to him, even...” I can’t bring myself to say any more.

“I’m so sorry you have to deal with this on top of everything else.” Her cool fingers glide along my jaw soothingly before she slumps back into the couch cushion. “What is it with us and timing? We can’t seem to catch a break.”

“What do you mean?”

“All these years, one thing or another kept us apart. I finally thought our luck was changing the night of the storm... the gym.” Her eyes dim to match her rueful smile. “But ever since we stepped back into the real world, it feels like we’ve been hit with one thing after the other.” She bites her bottom lip. “And it’s like there’s no end in sight.”

Wren is an optimist and for her to say this, there has to be more. She stares off into the distance, worry blanketing her gaze.

“Something else is wrong.” The back of my knuckles caress her cheek and she quivers. “Tell me.”

She fidgets with her hands, fingers lacing and unlacing in her lap. “I don’t want to add to what you’re already dealing with.”

“Wren, we’re in this together. What’s going on?”

“Lara Crandall came to the library today.”

“Okay.” I scratch my head, unsure as to where this is going. She’s Jed Crandall’s wife and that’s all I come up with.

Dot isn't close to her, or anyone really, so that isn't helpful. Again, I'm not making the connection or understanding why Wren looks like her dog died.

"The Crandalls are family sponsors." She stares off into space, eyes never meeting mine. "They were assigned to Jack."

A sinking sensation settles in my gut at her use of past tense. "Were?"

"I don't know if there's going to be a program."

I scoot closer until my thigh nudges her feet encased in the blanket, and as much as I want to reach out and touch her, hold her, I don't. I get the feeling she needs some space.

"What do you mean? Did you hear from the city council?"

"No, but Lara said she heard things weren't looking good for the program."

"From who?"

"I don't know."

"Is that what she said?"

"Not exactly."

"Okay, what did she say?" I squeeze her ankle through the blanket and try to infuse some calm into her. "Word for word."

"She mentioned that the program was on shaky ground. It may not be approved by the city council and it had something to do with misconduct..." Now she looks at me, eyes glassy with unshed tears. "Something to do with me."

"You?"

"Or maybe she meant us. I don't know, but she never did bring you up." Her hands cover her face and she groans into her palms before sliding them onto her lap.

"Do you think this is Dot?"

"I don't know. I haven't heard from the mayor or anyone from the city council. The waiting is excruciating."

“Hey, come here.” I pull her into my lap, and she crumples, wrapping her arms around me and burying her face into the crook of my neck.

She sobs and I hold her tight. The way she clings to me, her anguish, causes my stomach to roil. That all-consuming helplessness that has been invading my life for far too long cozies up beside me. I don’t know how to make this better.

All I can do is love her and let her know that she isn’t alone. No matter the outcome, we’re in this together. I wait for her to come up for air, all the while rubbing my hand tenderly up and down her back.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Until we hear from Malone or anyone else on the council, we shouldn’t assume the worst.”

She pulls back and sniffs. “I don’t know what to do. The fundraisers help, but without official approval and financial backing, the program will grind to a halt.”

I cup her face in my hands, and with my thumbs, I wipe the wet from under her eyes. “We’ll figure it out. Bright Horizons will take off.”

Her heartbreak causes more than a fissure in my own heart. Wrecked and agitated, I refuse to be the reason she loses everything she’s worked for. I refuse to be the reason three college-bound kids miss out on fulfilling their dreams.

The old adage “nice guys finish last” has never been truer, and I’m done letting things happen to us.

There’s only one thing I can do that’s within my power to change, and I don’t care how uncomfortable it makes me.

This is for Wren and the foster kids.

My lips part, eager to infuse some hope into her deflating soul when her mouth crashes onto mine. Her body pins me to the sofa, arms and legs draped over me.

She is everywhere, and suddenly, no thought or word is relevant.

At first, her kisses are soft, sweet, and tentative, and I savor every swipe of her tongue and press of her lips. Things don't stay that way for long.

Soon, her kisses turn ravenous and greedy. Her fingers plunder my hair, then her knuckles curl and she pulls ever so slightly on my strands. Her body—her warm, welcomed weight—sinks farther into me. Her pelvis grinds against mine.

Holy hell.

“Wren.” I pause our kiss.

Her mouth chases mine, lips curving upward into a smile against my own as she steals another kiss. “I don't want to talk anymore.”

“Really? I hadn't figured that out. But wait.” I hold her head a few inches from mine and study her wild eyes.

It's hard to gauge where her head is at. As much as I want her, I'm not convinced sex is the best thing right now. She's confused and hurting, and most likely angry. All understandable.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.” She shifts backward and I drop my hands to enable her to move freely.

Her long hair falls around us like a curtain, and I can't tell if that's to block out the rest of the world or if she's hiding. Long, lean fingers glide across the day's stubble on my jaw, fingers bending as they reach the back of my skull.

Wren grasps my face, her expression serious. “We never have enough time together. All we have are stolen moments, and I don't want to waste any time. Twist, I want you.”

Unfortunately, I know how she feels and she isn't wrong. The few hours here or there that we manage to have together are never enough.

Today in the library, touching her, hearing her breaths and inhaling her scent... While amazing and just what I need to keep going, the brevity of our time together is also frustrating and exhausting.

She could use a little boost, and I'm glad to be the one to give it to her. "I want you too but guess what?"

Her forehead rests against mine and she releases a puff of warm breath on my face, maybe a little annoyed. Does she think I'm stalling or about to put an end to this?

"What?"

I angle my face to snare her gaze and beam at her. "I told Eddie about my overnight visits and he already knew." I laugh and so does she. "I can stay the entire night. No more rushing to get back now that he knows. I get to wake up next to you in the morning."

With this news, she perks up as she nestles the soft warmth of her heat at the apex of her thighs against my hardening length. "You can?"

"Yeah. I'm all yours for the night."

A smile tugs on her lips, and she tightens her grip on my jaw. "I get to have my way with you."

"Always, Tyler." I sweep some of her hair to one side, over her shoulder, and cradle her cheek. "We don't have to have sex, you know?"

"I want to."

"Are you sure you're okay? I'd understand if you wanted to watch TV or sit here in silence or even go to bed. So long as I'm with you, I'm happy."

"I love you." She presses her lips to the center of my palm, eyes shuttering for that single second. "It was both hard and great to see you at the library today. I only wish we didn't have to hide. We could kiss and touch freely."

The rush of her words causes a wave of heat to spread throughout me. "I know, and I love that you want to kiss and touch me in public."

She meets my teasing tone with a sexy quirk of an eyebrow and lopsided grin. "Hmmm, in public will have to wait. I want to kiss you now." Her mouth plants a kiss on mine. "And then some..."

The innuendo of all the naughty things she wants to do to me causes a warm thrill to race up my spine.

“Tyler, tell me more.” My fingers grasp her hips.

“I want you to make love to me.” She kisses me once more, and with her sweet taste, I set out to make her forget all her worries. If not forever, just for a few hours.

“Your wish is my command.” My mouth sucks on the tender spot behind her ear. “But first, I need you naked.”

Together, between kisses and quips, we shed her clothes easily. She attempts to get rid of mine, but I don’t let her. Not yet. I want to see all of her. Although I have before, I can’t get enough of her.

My arm hooks around her slender waist, and I flip her off her feet and onto her back on the couch. She squeals and digs her nails into my shoulders, holding on tight.

“Don’t worry, Tyler, I’ve got you.” I kiss the tip of her freckled nose. “Always.”

I stare down at her, thankful for the warm glow of the lights in the room. I see all of her, notice everything.

The gold flecks in her earthy brown eyes. How the few freckles on the bridge of her nose scatter and fade along the length of her cheekbones. Baby hairs grow and curl along her hairline. The valley of her perfect tits that I fucked just the other night, marking her with my cum. Her nipples, brownish pink and tightly pebbled.

Her body’s my playground, and I want to have some fun, bring her only pleasure.

I drag my fingers through her folds and damn, she’s so wet. All for me. I do this to her.

My thumb swirls and strokes her clit while I push two fingers inside her. Her muscles grip my digits. “How’s this?”

I nibble at her smile and my tongue duels with hers. My balls draw up and cock strains to be free. To be deep inside her.

As if reading my mind, Wren grabs for my belt, never breaking the kiss, as she strips me of my jeans. It's clumsy and awkward, but I continue to slide my fingers in and out of her while my thumb plays with her clit.

She mewls and bucks her hips upward to meet the heel of my palm. "Yes, Twist. More, please."

I love the way she comes undone. The sounds she makes, her taste, and how ready she is for me.

Hooking a leg on my hip to open her up, I pull out my fingers and line up the tip of my cock with her entrance. "I love you, Wren."

"I love you, Oliver." Her hand latches on to my hip and she pulls me toward her, impatient for me to fuck her.

Jeans anchored to my ankles, I slide into her tight heat. Nirvana.

"Twist, you feel so good. Made for me."

We both moan in pleasure. Her body trembles, the leg clasped around my hip tensing and vibrating.

"Oliver, don't stop. Faster. Deeper." At her begging, my hips piston in and out of her.

Soon I'm close, and I try to draw my climax out, wanting to wait for her. Once again in sync, eyes hooded and heavy, Wren arches her neck and pulls me closer. I let loose, spilling into her on a growl as her body tightens and convulses with her orgasm.

After, we fumble with our clothes in hand up the stairs to her bedroom, and before I can pull back the covers, she slides open the balcony door. The crisp night air smacks my chest, shaking off some of my sleepy haze.

She grabs her pillows and pulls the edge of the duvet. "Outside."

I pause, half in the bed, half not, surprised. Usually, I'm the one coaxing her onto the balcony. The nights are getting cooler, but I love how it fills me with memories of the treehouse, of us at our most innocent and when we were the

closest. It was our favorite place. We were kids, and our love, our connection, was so pure and so real.

We are making our way back there. I believe it with all of who I am. I only wish we didn't have to go through the hellfire that is Dot Malone to get there.

"You sure?" I grab the other pillow.

"You'll keep me warm." She winks and grabs my wrist.

I bring my face really close to hers. "I promise I will."

She tips her head back and brings her lips to mine. "Like you, it reminds me of the treehouse. It always felt like our own little world. No one else existed, just us."

I nod and one of my fingers trails a path down her neck. "The best times in my life were spent in that treehouse with you."

"Mine too."

We snuggle under the blankets, under a canopy of twinkling lights.

"You warm?" I kiss the top of her head and inhale her familiar fresh scent.

"Uh-huh." She nestles into my side, head resting on my collarbone. "You know, we never did get this close in the treehouse when we were younger."

Under the comforter, her cool fingers skate over the bare flesh of my abdomen, making me shiver in the most enjoyable way. She giggles at my reaction, and I rest my hand on top of hers, trapping it to keep it from wandering any farther.

"We did. Don't you remember the time the zipper on my sleeping bag broke and you let me sleep with you in yours?" I squeeze her close. "Mind you, it was all innocent."

"Yes, it was, and even back then, I loved you like I love you now." She glances up at me, a small blissful smile dancing on her lips. "We may not have known it then, but we were meant for each other."

"Definitely."

Chapter 18

Wren

Oliver pulls slow, shallow breaths through slightly parted lips while sleeping. The strong lines and angles of his face are relaxed, smooth, and serene.

The small crescent-shaped scar above one eyebrow—the one he got from falling from my treehouse in third grade—teases a nostalgic smile from me. I want to trace the arc with my fingertips but don't want to wake him.

The sight of him knocks me breathless. At a little after six in the morning, I have half a mind to jump back under the covers with him. This is when everything is perfect. Just the two of us and no room for the outside world. Slowly, I slide the glass door closed and head downstairs to leave. I can't stay and know he will lament waking up alone.

Last night was melancholy and wonderful, all at the same time. We were together and that's what mattered the most. But we are both dealing with a lot right now. We're both trying to figure out a way to be together with the least amount of damage to what matters most to us.

Despite everything, I didn't sleep so well. At first, we both lay awake, each trying not to let the other know that we weren't asleep. Eventually, he drifted off while I lay awake for several hours, staring up at the stars.

First, I was heartbroken over Oliver's news about his father. He never really knew the man, and now that he is gone, there isn't anything he can do or say to the man to unburden his emotions.

Second, I spent far too long mulling over how best to stop Dot from killing the program. Lara's tidbit of news might have nothing to do with Dot, but even if it doesn't, she could still pull the plug.

Then it hit me. The solution is simpler than I thought—but not necessarily easier—and that's when I realized I've been looking at the problem all wrong.

I have to stop Dot. She is unpredictable and untrustworthy. Even if by some miracle, we are able to come to an agreement, I have no way of believing she would actually follow through.

Ultimately, I envision her promising to back off on Bright Horizons if I leave Oliver. But I know that wouldn't actually satisfy her, not that I could do it anyway. Walking away from Oliver will never be an option. Selfishly, I want both—Bright Horizons and the man I love with all my heart.

Why do I have to sneak around with Oliver and hide our love? Why do I have to walk away, lose Oliver, and the chance at a life, family, and home with him?

I don't have to...and I don't plan to.

After feeding and walking Gretzky and Jordan, I drive to city hall. Rumor has it William Malone can be found in his office as early as six in the morning. Sure enough, when I get within a few feet of his office, the door is ajar and the lights are on.

Apprehensive, I pause and wait a beat or two, listening. Someone is inside and isn't that why I came? To talk to the man.

Shoulders squared, I take the final few steps and rap on the door before entering. No one is in the small reception area, and no one emerges from the open door to what I'm guessing is the mayor's office. I step inside.

Beyond the reception desk, a small waiting area, and a filing cabinet, the mayor stands in the adjacent room with a file folder open in his hand.

My fist raps on the doorframe and I peek my head into his office. "Good morning, Mayor Malone."

I enter and thrust out my cold hand to shake his. The tall man, plump around the middle, closes the folder and wraps my hand in his.

“Oh, good morning, Miss Tyler.” Bill pulls at the lapel of his dark gray suit and glances behind me. Is he looking for his receptionist? Or to see if I’m alone?

“Please call me Wren.”

“Of course. Ah, have a seat.” He pulls out a chair for me, facing his mahogany desk, and then slides behind into his chair. Expression perplexed, his gaze flits from me to his computer screen. “I don’t think we had an appointment...”

He trails off to grip the mouse, shaking the computer awake, maybe to check his calendar.

“No. No, we don’t and I do apologize for showing up like this and at this hour.” I pause until his usually sharp, brown eyes meet mine. “But I had to.”

Salt-and-pepper eyebrows climb to his matching hairline. “You did?”

“Yes.” I slide forward almost in a conspiratorial fashion, hoping to create some kind of connection with this man. That I am good people and can be trusted. “This is kind of awkward, and I don’t think there’s really any right way to start, so I’m just going to go for it.”

He leans forward too, resting his elbows on the desk. “Yes, that sounds like a good idea.”

On the drive over here, I’d already figured starting with calling out Dot wasn’t the best approach. If I want this man to listen to me and sympathize, maligning his daughter, even if she deserves it, isn’t going to get me anywhere.

Let’s hope ambiguity works.

“I don’t know what you’ve heard, but please don’t let rumor and speculation about my actions impact Bright Horizons’ approval.”

“Excuse me? Rumor and speculation?” He cocks his head to one side and studies me as if he’s only now seeing me for

the first time. “You’re here about your proposal? And what rumors and speculation are you talking about?”

Is he playing ignorant or is he really clueless? Okay, let’s try another angle.

“I heard from Lara Crandall that Bright Horizons could be in trouble.”

“Trouble?”

Is he going to repeat everything I say?

“Yes. I’m not exactly sure what kind of trouble, only that it had to do with...me.”

“Why would Lara Crandall know anything?” His annoyance is now apparent with the mention of the woman, fingers fisting on the desk as his nostrils flare. I know the feeling.

I get the sense he wants to say more but manages to stop himself. He is an elected official after all. There’s no way Bill would want any disparaging comments he might say about his constituents to get out.

“I don’t know. She just seemed pretty sure of herself.”

He juts his chin in the air, clearly not amused. “Well, she’s wrong.” His fingers unfurl and he starts to drum them on the wood as he stares at me intently. “Wren, is this about the delay in getting back to you about your proposal?”

I’m confused. He doesn’t seem in the least bit upset with me or the program, and now I’m doubting if Dot even talked to her father. But what if she does?

“Um, sort of. You were supposed to meet with me, then it was canceled, and a new date hasn’t been scheduled.”

“I do apologize for canceling, and I haven’t asked my assistant to book another meeting because I’ve been dealing with an unfortunate matter. Things have been hectic and I don’t want to have to cancel again...” His hands rise, palms out, as if to keep me away or, more likely, stop me from pressing him for more details. “I’m afraid that’s all I can say.”

“Of course, I completely understand and feel a bit foolish now. There is also the matter of...” I bite my bottom lip, second-guessing if I should say any more.

Things seem to be resolved; Lara Crandall doesn't know what she's talking about. But if I don't say everything I came to say, the threat of Dot still stands.

He stops midway to standing, anxious for me to continue. I can't shut the door now that I've opened it. “Dot.”

“Dorothy?” He sits again, more confused than ever, and scratches his head. “What does she have to do with this?”

“There's no nice way to say this. Dot kind of blackmailed me. She threatened to have you reject my proposal if I didn't do what she said.” I wince and hold his gaze.

“She what?” Now he's on his feet, cheeks red. “What did she blackmail you with?”

I was afraid he'd ask but understand why. Who wouldn't?

“It isn't my place to tell her business. Let's just say, she wanted me to keep my mouth shut about something I saw.”

This isn't about protecting Dot, only Oliver. I'm guessing this man has no clue his daughter's relationship with Oliver Winslow has long since been dead. I'm not going to be the bearer of that news as much as I want to. I'm not looking to incur anymore of Dot's wrath, only to do what's necessary to secure the future of the program.

“I-I don't know what to say. Perhaps if I knew more I could address this with her. Wren—”

“Mr. Malone, I'm not looking for you to interfere or fix anything regarding Dot. My only concern was her threat about the program. That's why I came straight to you in the hopes that you'd hear me out if in fact she had tried to persuade you to kill my proposal.”

“I can assure you, the program will be approved.”

“Approved?” Now I sound like him, echoing his words, and my heart rate spikes with excitement.

“Yes. It’s only a matter of dotting the *Is* and crossing our *Ts*, but I can assure you, what you’ve got here is a wonderful start. We see great potential for this program across the region. As you know, the state has an increasing number of foster kids, and while funding is scarce and the resources to support beyond eighteen are practically nonexistent, programs like yours will help in closing that gap.”

“This is great news.” My smile is huge and uncontrollable as I spring to my feet and shake his hand again. “I can’t thank you enough. This means the world to me and to the kids.”

He beams and leads me to the exit, rambling on about how he’ll be in touch soon. My heart swells with pure joy and a little disbelief. Dot was bluffing, or if she intends to talk to her father, she’s in for a rude awakening.

I should be worried that once she finds out I went to her father, I’ll become more of a target, but I simply can’t waste any energy on her. Bright Horizons will be approved.

That and Oliver are all I care about.

The mayor gently touches my elbow to stop me from leaving the office, and it pulls me from my thoughts.

He stares down at me solemnly. “Thank you for coming to talk to me. I only wish more people took a more straightforward approach. And while I had nothing to do with the situation you found yourself in, I do want to apologize for the terrible actions of my daughter.”

He pulls at his tie and swallows with difficulty as if his daughter’s misstep constricts his airway. “I want to assure you, if Dorothy had come to me with any such suggestion, she wouldn’t have succeeded, and I will deal with my daughter. She won’t be bothering you anymore. Have a good day.”

“Thank you, and you too.” I sprint from the building to my car and fumble for my phone.

More than anything, there’s only one person I want to talk to. I dial his number and he answers on the first ring.

“Wren, are you okay?” The slight distress in his voice tugs at my heart.

A small part of me regrets leaving him in bed like I did, although everything turned out for the best.

“Oliver, I’m great. Where are you?”

“Not in bed with you which is where I wish we both were.”

A groan slips out, and I put the car into drive, the phone now on Bluetooth. “I’m sorry. I really am. It was torture leaving you, but there was something I had to do. I want to tell you all about it. Now. Where are you?”

I slow the car to almost a crawl, stalling until Oliver tells me where to find him. If he’s still at my place, snuggled under the blankets, I’d willingly climb under them with him, even if our time together would be short-lived. I need to be at the library by ten.

“I’m at the Grill and glad you called. I texted you when I woke up but didn’t hear from you.”

My foot hits the accelerator with a destination now in mind. “Sorry. I was busy and didn’t look at my phone. I’m on my way to you. Where do you want to meet? Out back of the Grill? Or maybe the Nest?”

His place of business isn’t too far from my family restaurant, and at least we’ll have privacy, be able to be together without worrying about prying eyes.

“The Grill. We aren’t hiding anymore. I want to see you and want you to be here for something.”

“O...kay.” Curious, I wonder what he’s up to but can’t deny the immediate roiling of my stomach. “Are you sure? What about Dot?”

“We’re done hiding. As soon as you get here, everything will make sense.”

Chapter 19

Oliver

I spot Wren the second her car pulls into the parking lot of the Grill from where I'm sitting at a table next to the window. There's a spring in her step, and she beams from ear to ear as she saunters toward the entrance.

Before she's even through the door, I'm on her. My hands firmly grasp her hips and I pull her to me, kissing her senseless.

Breathless, she breaks away. "Oliver." Her eyes dart around the room, probably cataloging just how many people may have caught us kissing.

Most mornings, the Grill is packed. It's one of only two places in town worth their weight in gold for breakfast.

"Uh, did you forget?" She struggles to break free of my grasp. "We aren't alone."

"Nope, I didn't." Smiling, I drag her with me to the front of the restaurant, close to the main server station. "Told you, we aren't hiding anymore."

Percy pauses on her way to a table, her hands filled with plates of food, brow furrowed. "You two okay?"

Like her sister, she furtively glances around the restaurant. A few patrons stare at us, mouths agape. They're likely wondering why I kissed Wren Tyler when I'm supposedly engaged to Dot Malone.

"I don't think so. Did Oliver hit his head or something?" Wren lifts her hand as if to check my skull then thinks better

of it and lets her arm fall to her side. “What is going on?”

“You tell me your news first then I will.”

Percy strolls past us, shaking her head. “What is this, you show me yours and I’ll show you mine?”

“Something like that.” I smirk and turn my gaze back to Wren. “So, come on, tell me why you got up so early. What was so important you left me all alone?”

I mock pout and she frowns. “I can’t. It’s really good news but not here.”

“I love that you’re worried about me, us, but we don’t have to anymore. I tell you what, I’ll go first.”

With her hand in mine, I pull us into what is the closest thing to the center of the place just as Pop moseys from the employees only doorway at the back of the restaurant. His steps falter as his gaze lands on us.

I tip my head at him in greeting, but I’m not waiting for him to come close, to talk to him. If so, he might stop me. He still could. It’s now or never.

“Good morning, everyone.” I clank a spoon against my coffee cup and project my voice loud and clear over the din of the restaurant. “Hello. I don’t want to take up too much of your time. I’ve got an announcement to make.”

The chatter dies down, and heads turn my way.

Pop clears his throat and strides over to us. “Oliver, this is a restaurant, not the town square. I don’t care what you’re—”

“Pop, let him speak,” both Wren and Percy say at the same time as a chuckle from behind me catches my attention.

Maddox settles on one of the stools along the counter and leans his elbow and back against the counter. Without knowing what I’m doing or why, he gives me a thumbs-up and flashes a cocky grin.

“Go on then.” Pop grudgingly steps back and crosses his arms over his chest.

“Most of you know me. I’m Oliver Winslow and I’m a private man. Generally, I’d never do something like this, but Dot has given me no choice.”

A wave of murmurs rise among the people, and I hold up my hands and raise my voice. “Before I say any more, I want you to know this isn’t me bad-mouthing Dot Malone. In fact, I gave her ample opportunity to take the lead and tell everyone her way. Unfortunately, she chose to do nothing, and in turn, it left me hanging. I’m no longer able to sit by and let her tell lies that affect me and my life.”

Wren tugs on my sleeve, eyes flaring wide and wild. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

I nod and turn back to the clearly rapt crowd. This is both a blessing and a curse of a small town. Everyone feasts on everyone else’s business. It’s a national pastime.

“A little over two years ago now, I called off our engagement.” This news garners another outburst of gasps, whispers, and people shifting and shuffling in their seats.

“I was the one to end the relationship.” This point bears repeating although I have no doubt somewhere along the way, the reverse may be told. “Dot said she needed time to figure out how she was going to tell her family and friends. I gave that to her. But as you can see, that day never came. Dot was stalling and I tried to give her the time she needed.”

An embarrassing slash of red colors my cheeks. I can feel the heat as I fess up to my greatest mistake. “We haven’t been together since the day I called off the engagement. In fact, I am madly in love with Wren Tyler. I plan to marry her.”

I pull her closer into my side, and at the same time, Maddox cups his hands around his mouth and lets a few hollers rip. A couple of men in the back join in with whoops and other people chuckle and clap. Pop shifts uncomfortably and sharpens his eyes on me.

“Dot’s baby isn’t mine.” This revelation causes an uproar with several tables breaking out into conversations. Some are

loud and others whisper as if no one could possibly guess what or who they're talking about.

“And there's one more thing. I was recently informed that my father, Merrick Winslow, as a public official may have misappropriated town funds for his own personal gains. I don't know if this is true, and I fully support an investigation. While neither Eddie nor I were aware and we are not our father, we do sincerely apologize for this.”

A long silence falls over the crowd. Most people avert their gaze. I knew this wasn't going to be easy, and the fallout of my father's wrongdoings might take some time. My announcement will spread through town, and in hours or maybe even days, whatever repercussions there will be will come to light.

“Oliver.” Wren slides an arm around my waist, tentatively smiling. “Why did you do that?”

“Because I wasn't going to let Dot have control over us and our lives. I'm going to take care of Bright Horizons next. She isn't going to—”

Her grin grows wider as she cuts me off. “Seems like we were both thinking the same thing. You don't have to do anything about Bright Horizons. It's a go.” She jumps into the air and throws her arms around me.

“What? Really?” I hold her in my arms so we're eye level. She nods and laughs. “That's amazing. What happened?”

She fills me in on her visit to the mayor and how Bill Malone had no idea his daughter had threatened her, nor did he or the council have any intention of rejecting the program. In fact, their objective was the exact opposite.

She makes a point of stressing that she didn't bring me up or the whole broken engagement and pregnancy debacle. All of which I appreciate. I'll have to talk to him eventually, once everything is out in the open. But ultimately, that mess is for Dot to clean up.

As Wren finishes with how things were left with the mayor, Maddox interrupts with a slap to my shoulder. “Well,

well, that was some kind of speech.”

“Had to be done.”

Percy joins us too and adds, “I couldn’t agree more.”

Mad then gives Wren a light squeeze on the arm and looks back to me. “How long do you figure it’ll take Dot to hear about this?”

“Maybe an hour,” I say at the same time Percy says, “Twenty minutes.”

“Well, you better be prepared to run,” he jokes, and the women laugh, though Wren’s gaze holds a hint of apprehension.

I tighten my hold in reassurance. “Doesn’t matter what she does. The truth is out there. Dot can’t hurt us anymore.”

“I wouldn’t have handled it the way you did.” Pop joins our group, eyes fixed on me. “But that’s one way of setting the record straight and getting your life in order.”

His large, calloused hand wraps around the nape of my neck, and he squeezes like he used to do when I was younger. It was his way of showing me he was proud of me.

“Thanks, Pop.” He shakes my hand and then draws Wren in for a hug.

Maddox shakes his head and offers a wry grin. “You know, I’d like to say I’m surprised by all that Dot’s done, but I remember high school. She was always conniving and controlling.”

I mash my lips together despite how much I want to admonish him for not warning me off Dot. Although he’d already left town when I started dating her, and as much as it leaves a foul taste in my mouth, this was all my doing. I was the one who looked at Dot as someone to have fun with and instead ended up with a whole lot more heartache.

Pop shakes his head and glances around our small group. It’s plain to see he’s struggling with something. “I know you’d told me, but hearing you say it out loud, like this...” He breaks off and clenches his jaw. Knowing this man the way I do, it

feels like he holds some responsibility for my predicament. While honorable, it's misguided. "I wasn't there for you. While you didn't come around, I should've sought you out—"

I can't stand to see him like this and cut him off, aiming to put him out of his misery.

"Yeah, the past couple of years were rough, but I'm somewhat to blame. I now realize I should've acted a lot sooner. I could've spared Wren the anguish of facing off with Dot."

His head swings to his daughter, and Percy blurts out before he can say anything, "What did Dot do?"

Her sister breathes fire and her father echoes the sentiment, both clearly ready for battle. Wren smiles warmly. "Hey, it's all right now."

While it seems like she wants to end it at that, exhausted with rehashing the ordeal, her family isn't going to leave things there. Wren then wades into Dot's attempt at blackmail, carefully skirting her sighting of Kellen and Dot, and wraps up with her conversation this morning with the mayor.

We talk for a few more minutes, although Wren becomes unusually quiet, and finally Pop and Percy return to work.

"Well, I should get going too." Maddox drops a few bills on the counter and slides his arms around both of us for a group hug. "I love you guys. I'm so glad you finally got together. It's about time."

We laugh and say our goodbyes, and as soon as he's out of earshot, I lead Wren over to a corner. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just want to make sure you're okay with what you did."

We both scan the restaurant and tongues are still wagging, with a few people still watching us from afar.

I take both her hands in mine. "I was doing a disservice to the Winslow name by keeping quiet. What kind of man would I be if I let Dot continue to torment you?"

“Oh, look at you, being all chivalrous.” Her flirty smile fades as her expression softens and so does her tone. “She was tormenting you too and for far longer than me.”

“It no longer matters. We’re finally rid of her. Let’s go back to where you were calling me a white knight.” I wink to get a giggle out of her and it works.

“Those weren’t my exact words. Even still, what I love the most is...”

I draw her flush against my body, and the words stop pouring from her mouth. At first, she stiffens, conscious that we’re in a public place. It’ll take some time for both of us to relax and just be together when around other people. But with the gentle kneading of my fingers on her waist, she relaxes into me.

“Tell me, what do you love the most about me?” My smile, untamed and far too big, takes over my face.

Wren looks up at me and smiles. “You don’t fight my battles for me.”

Before she can say more, I finish for her. “No, I fight next to you.”

We kiss and she pulls away to look up at me, hands still clasped behind my neck. “While you already have a key, I want to do this the right way. Make it official and all.”

“Official? I’m listening.”

“Oliver Winslow, move in with me.” Her lips softly tease and taste mine, and I swear the earth quakes and my insides melt.

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

Chapter 20

Wren

“**H**ey, would you move? I’m watching the game.” Maddox swipes his hand at Percy from my father’s armchair.

While there’s no heat to his groan, my sister sticks out her tongue at him and drops onto the sofa beside me. “Who invited you anyway?”

“Hey.” I tap her knee in admonishment. “Oliver and I did.”

“Ooh, look at you.” She holds up air quotes and singsongs, “Oliver and me.”

“Shush, you.” I swat her leg.

Mad chuckles, and at the same time, Oliver saunters into the room juggling four beers. He hands one to Mad, then Perce, and finally me as he slips in next to me on the couch.

“Cheers.” He clinks the neck of my bottle with his as the doorbell rings.

Pop hollers from the kitchen, “On it.”

It has been three days since Oliver’s public announcement and my conversation with the mayor. Neither of us have heard a peep from Dot. Generally an optimist, I want to say this is a good thing—everyone close to me thinks it is—though she’s eerily quiet.

I wish I could say the same for the town. At work, over the past few days, I’ve had more than the usual visitors, many townsfolk popping in to gawk at the woman who won Oliver Winslow’s heart. Or if they’re more salacious minded than

that, they're there to see the one who bested Dot Malone. The funny thing is, even with all the pretenses and masks Dot wears to make everyone think she's this wonderful person, far too many of us couldn't escape the fury of the storm constantly brewing behind her façade.

Jack's question halts my meandering mind. "Miss Wren, I'm going to get a soda. Do you want anything?" Getting up from the spot on the floor where he's sprawled with Court and Brayden, he smiles at me.

"I'm good. Oliver just got me a beer." I hold up my drink. "But thanks."

At the mention of Oliver, he blushes and dips his head. Reggie snickers from the other armchair in the room, eyes on us instead of the TV. She claims Jack has a crush on me, and while I've noticed little things, it's all innocent.

"I'd love a drink, Jackie boy." Her eyes are on me, making faces like "*I told you so*" while Jack nods at her.

While Reggie isn't close to my father's age, she is a few years older than Eddie, has a strong maternal vibe, and takes it upon herself to oversee these kinds of things.

"Stop looking at me like that." I lean closer to her and lower my voice. "You said you wouldn't bring it up again."

She chuckles and mimes zipping her mouth shut although we both know this isn't the last time she'll bring it up. Truthfully, her playful ribbing doesn't bother me so long as Jack isn't embarrassed.

"Reg is pure trouble, isn't she?" Oliver's lips graze the shell of my ear.

I laugh and shake my head, settling back into his side. These past few days have been pure bliss. It's like we've been living together all our lives. Oliver and I found our groove instantaneously. Now we're all here at Pop's for Sunday dinner. It's a family tradition. For as long as I can remember, it's the one night a week that I'm guaranteed to see my father and sister along with whoever's been invited.

Sunday is the only day of the week that my father kind of takes the day off. He usually gets up late, or late for him at seven in the morning, then he tinkers around home for a bit before going to the Grill for a few hours. Then we'll meet at his place, sometimes put on football, and eat.

Coach Bell trudges into the room, pulling at the waistband of his pants. He's dressed in his Sunday best—black slacks, a button-down, and tie. The poor man is uncomfortable. Two of his fingers tug at the collar of his shirt.

“Good afternoon, everyone.” He holds up a hand in greeting, smiling, eyes drifting down to the boy on the carpet. “Bray.” Then he continues his perusal of the room. “Maddox, I heard you were back in town. Good to see you.”

“Nice to see you too, Coach.”

The men shake hands, all eyes glued to the exchange, as Jack swaggers back into the room. Coach glances around the room, looking for a place to sit, and before I can catch my breath, Oliver grips my waist and scoops me into his lap.

“Sit here, Coach.” He pats what's sure to be a warm cushion from where I was just sitting.

Deliberately, I wiggle around on his lap, and I feel him hardening as a low groan escapes his lips. He leans into my neck, voice low for only me to hear. “Stop that.”

“Next time, ask before hoisting me into your lap.” I glide a hand around his neck. “I would've come willingly.”

One brow quirks as if to challenge. “Then what's the problem?”

Coach clears his throat, and Oliver and I refocus on the room. “You two getting along well?” Directed at us, his question sounds mechanical and awkward. “I heard all you've been through.”

Even though he's got a heart of gold, Coach doesn't do personal, and I can only imagine how hard it must be for him to ask. And it's only more proof the town's doing what they do best—spreading other people's business.

That has me wondering again, why haven't we heard from Dot? There were a few sightings around town that I've heard about at the library. By all accounts, she's acting like nothing has happened.

"We're great, thanks. And you?"

"Good. Good." He stares at the empty cushion next to us but doesn't make a move to sit. "So, uh, Oliver, I'm still waiting on you to put in your application. I told you, it's just the process; the position would be yours. They'd like to make both announcements at once."

Oliver fidgets beneath me, muscles tensing. "Um, Coach, I'm not—"

"What position?" Maddox swigs his beer.

The older man runs a hand over his near bald head. "It isn't out yet, but I'm retiring in December." Coach pauses to eye Courtney, Brayden, and Jack. "And you three never heard a thing, got it?"

They all nod, expressions serious, though I suspect his impending retirement isn't that much of a secret. The announcement is supposed to be out any day now, and I've heard chatter and speculation around town about who people think might replace him.

"Oh, congratulations." Maddox raises his beer and smiles. "Oliver, you going for Coach's job?"

The man close to me releases a low sigh and rakes a hand through his hair. We talked about this very thing last night. About how he had to let Coach down easy. With the situation with Dot now out in the open, Oliver's confident she'll relent on the Nest if only to save face. He wants to keep his business and take it global.

"Uh, about that, Coach. I've been meaning to talk to you. Do you want to go outside or in the kitchen or something?"

Oliver starts to move me when Coach puts out a hand and curls his fingers toward himself. "Spit it out. The cat's out of the bag; there's no point in keeping things on the down low."

He sounds amused but also a tad agitated, likely suspecting Oliver will turn him down.

“I really appreciate you considering me—”

“Oliver, let me stop you there. I get it, you’re not interested.” Everything about him—expression, shoulders, stance—deflates. “I only thought you’d be a great fit. We need someone who’s going to care about the kids, the sports...”

He slumps into the seat next to us and Oliver frowns. “Coach, I do and I’m honored you thought to ask me. If I didn’t already have a job, a business I built with my own hands that I love, I’d jump at this opportunity.”

“Hey, Coach, what would you say if I was interested?” Maddox leans forward in his chair, elbows resting on his thighs, and all gazes settle on him.

I wriggle forward in Oliver’s lap. “Mad, what about racing?”

He flushes and hangs his head for a beat. “I’m done with that. Retired.” The grin he presents us with pinches at my chest. Obligatory and ironic, it isn’t one of a man embracing his fate.

“What?” Percy places her beer on the table. “So you’re moving back to Winslow Grove?”

Oliver and I share a curious look. Mad has been evasive at best, more silent than anything else about his last race and all that we’ve read and seen in the media. None of us know what happened, and while we haven’t pushed, the man is tight-lipped.

“Yeah.” His smile is more genuine and maybe even hopeful. “For the time being, I’m crashing with my mom, but I’ll need to find a place of my own.” He turns to Coach. “And a job.”

Both Mad and Oliver went to the same college and took the same courses, so he’s just as qualified for Coach’s position.

“You serious?” Coach straightens. “If you are, let’s talk. You’d be a better choice than the yahoo Lara Crandall wants.”

The teens snicker until Coach shoots them a “behave” look and the room falls silent, save for the TV and the ticking of the clock.

Pop moseys into the living room, wiping his hands on a towel. “Let’s eat.”

I get up and take Oliver’s hand, the two of us hanging back to talk with Mad.

“We’re happy you’re staying in town.” I squeeze his shoulder.

Oliver steps in beside him. “You want this?”

“Sure.” Mad shrugs.

Oliver pushes. “Winslow Grove? Teaching high school gym and coaching? Because we both know it’s a far cry from jet-setting around the world, racing the fastest car, and living the high life with all the finest things money can buy.”

Mad winces and shakes his head, expression now somber. “I know, Oliver. I’m fully aware that my lifestyle would be completely different. Simpler.” He slides in front of us, stopping us in our tracks. “That’s what I want.” He scratches his chin in mock contemplation, suddenly defensive. “I thought you didn’t want the job? Or is it that you don’t want me back in town?”

“Mad—” I say, but Oliver cuts me off, “That isn’t it and you know it. It’s just that this town and this life, you used to say it was too small for you. Your mom... Too suffocating. I’m making sure you know what you’re doing. I’d want nothing more than to have my best friend back in town.”

He clamps a hand on Maddox’s shoulder. His friend relaxes, all the vim and vigor fizzles out of him, and his shoulders sag. “Shit, sorry, bro. It’s just been a lot of change in a short amount of time. I want to be here. Katie Rae’s here, you two, and I’d love coaching and teaching. I think this is meant to be.” He claps Oliver on the back and turns to stroll into the dining room.

Before we follow, I tug at Oliver’s arm. “Try not to worry. This is a good thing. We’re here for Mad, and I know how

much you've missed him."

"Yeah, it is. He just seems haunted and won't talk about what happened. And where's Erica in all this?"

"Give it time. On a more positive note, I think Coach is going to be all over this."

He chuckles and hauls me flush against him. "I want to be all over you."

Someone clears their throat from behind Oliver, and I peer over his shoulder.

My father stands in the hallway, expression neutral. "You two care to join us or are you going to make us wait for grace? Food's getting cold while you do whatever it is you're doing."

Our heads knock together and we snicker. Once more, I feel like a kid, this moment reminiscent of all the times Pop would tell us to cut out our antics and get to the table. Joy swells inside of me.

In unison, we say, "Sorry, Pop."

Without waiting for my father to leave, I grab Oliver's face and kiss him long and hard. "I love you, Twist."

Chapter 21

Wren

“I could read that chapter over and over again.” Serena fans herself with the book, cheeks pink.

Some of the women murmur agreement while others giggle in delight.

“What chapter was it again?” Reggie flips through her book, clearly going to read said chapter as soon as she’s alone.

Three women chime all at once, “Twenty,” and the rest break out in boisterous laughter.

We’re close to finishing this month’s novel for the romance book club, and all in all, it’s been a huge success. Everyone loved the book with some planning to read more from the indie author.

“All right.” I stand and survey the women sitting in a circle upstairs in the cozy makeshift living room of the library. “Serena’s chosen the next book, ‘Yours to Hold.’” I grasp the beautiful cover of Emily Silver’s novel for all to see. “If everyone has a copy and we’ve got our date next month, does anyone have any questions?”

Some of the women break out into smiles, and at first, I think they’re admiring the adoring couple on the cover, but then two or three of them giggle and point to something behind me.

“Now there’s serious book boyfriend material,” one woman says, batting her eyelashes as she stares beyond me.

“Definitely,” another says while also looking over my shoulder.

“Eww, that’s my sister’s boyfriend.” Percy puckers her lips like she’s just sucked on a lemon, and I’m completely baffled.

“He’s too young to be my boyfriend, but no doubt that there is a fine man.” Reggie’s no-nonsense tone cuts through my confusion, and at the same time, a floorboard creaks behind me.

I whip around and gasp at the man standing before me. Oliver unleashes his brilliant smile to a few more coos from the women and leans forward to kiss me hello.

As our lips touch, a chorus of *oohs* and *aahs* erupt around us. The kiss is dizzying and that’s why it takes longer than it should for me to pull away from him. I abruptly end our kiss and press my fingers to my mouth, cheeks heating. He stares, eyes dark and filled with thoughts of naughty things, and I wish we were alone.

In chorus, the women say, “Hi, Oliver,” in a sing-song, flirty tone that causes my insides to burst into flames. I’m not embarrassed but more wishing they wouldn’t objectify my man. I can’t blame them, though I wish they’d keep it to themselves.

Before I can catch my breath or find my tongue, he replies in kind to the group.

“Hi,” he then says quietly to me while tucking a few strands of my hair behind my ear.

I echo his greeting, though it comes out breathy. My stomach suddenly giddy with nerves, I don’t want to turn around and face the group of women. I’m never going to live this down.

Oliver does it for me. He spins me around to face them and tucks me under his arm.

A few women pepper him with mundane questions. A few simply admire him, gazes drinking him in from head to toe. This goes on for longer than I’d like, and I try to get us back on track a few times.

Finally, Reggie slips two fingers into her mouth and whistles to get everyone's attention. It's like Oliver's a celebrity, or maybe he seems accessible now that Dot isn't attached to him.

"Okay, ladies, it's time to go. Thanks for a great evening, Wren."

Taking my cue, Percy, Serena, and Zoe follow my lead and help with straightening the chairs and cushions. Slowly, they all leave until it's only Oliver and me.

"You certainly caused a lot of excitement tonight." I flick off the light switch and he helps me put my coat on.

"I didn't mean to. I figured you'd be done. Jack wasn't out front so I came on upstairs, and by the time I realized everyone was still here, they'd all spotted me. Well, all but you."

He grips the edges of my coat and pulls me close. The brush of his lips over my cheek, then lips, sends shivers through me. His fingers caress the sides of my neck, sliding back to wrap around my nape, awakening a yearning that overrides everything else.

I curl my fingers around his wrists. "Let's get home."

"I'm with you." With one more quick kiss, he releases me and pushes the door open into the cold night.

While I lock the library door, my back to the street, a familiar voice says, "Wren, Oliver. Glad you're still here."

"Zoe, what's wrong?" Oliver takes a step toward her.

I turn around to face her as she jogs up the sidewalk. "You okay?"

"It's my car. I have a flat tire." Distraught, she jingles the key ring in her hand. "I should know how to change a tire." Flustered, she avoids my gaze. "I hate to ask—"

"Hey, it's okay." He lays a supportive hand on her shoulder. "Do you have a spare?"

"Yeah. I started to change it, but I can't loosen some of the lug nuts." She hangs her head.

He offers a gentle smile. “That’s okay. I can help.”

She shoves her hands into her coat pockets. “Thank you.”

I glance to the library parking lot. With the exception of my car and Oliver’s, it’s empty. “Where did you park your car?”

Zoe points down the street. “I’m on Main Street, just outside Lou’s. I had dinner there and walked over.”

“Okay.” He turns to me. “Let me walk you to your car and I’ll meet you at home.”

“Are you sure? I can wait.”

“Uh, I’m so sorry,” Zoe interjects and we both reassure her that it’s fine.

All three of us walk toward the lot with Oliver holding my hand. “There’s no point in both of us being out in the cold.”

I give Zoe a hug once we’ve reached my car. “Text me once you’re home and I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Of course. Thank you and I’m sor—”

“Stop it.” I lightly shake her and she laughs before leading the way to her car.

“See you soon.” Oliver lightly kisses the top of my head, and in a few large strides, he’s at Zoe’s side.

I get in, drop my phone into the cupholder, start the engine, and blast the heat. Just then a text comes in and I pause in fastening my seat belt to check. It’s a short text from my sister.

Percy: You and Oliver are the cutest.

A giggle flies from my mouth as I snap the seat belt into place and make a mental note to text her when I get home.

With my foot on the brake, I slip the car into reverse and check the rear-view mirror. I scream, shocked to see a woman standing at the back of the car. If I reverse, I’ll hit her.

With the heel of her palm, she bangs on the trunk and shouts, “Get out. We need to talk.”

Lungs constricting and heart trying to lurch from my chest, my body tenses. Oh my God, it's Dot.

Like a hurricane intent on destruction, Dot barrels toward my side of the car. Legs shaky, I unbuckle my seat belt and get out, not happy to be facing her—but I knew this was coming.

Rattled and incensed, I slam the door and lean my face close to hers. “What the hell are you doing? Do you want to get yourself killed?”

Something is different about her. She doesn't so much as acknowledge my outrage or her stupid move. It's as if she vibrates on a higher frequency; her body almost buzzes and yet, there's an unusual restraint. As if she's caged or holding back. Everything about her is strained and ominous.

Her finger stabs at me, and the moonlight captures her features, eyes thin blade-like slits and mouth pinched tight. “You think you got one over on me.”

I step back, suddenly needing a little distance from her. We're too close, and if she is a caged animal, I don't want to be anywhere near her when it's released.

“What are you talking about?” Furtively, I glance down the street, not wanting her to catch on. I've got a good idea what she's referring to and want to keep her talking.

The street is empty and quiet. Oliver and Zoe are out of sight but not too far away. Although, I'm not so sure they'd hear me if I were to scream.

I'm not scared of Dot. Well, that isn't entirely true. The woman can be rash and impulsive on a good day, never mind when she doesn't get her way or someone's pissed her off. Right now, that would be me. I wish Oliver was here.

Then it hits me. She would've seen us leave the library. She must have been hiding, waiting to get me alone. Or did she plan to ambush both of us and figured luck was on her side when she got only me?

“You think you're so smart. So fucking blessed because everyone loves you, and you've finally got Oliver. But Wren,

you've got it all wrong." A maniacal laugh rushes from her mouth, her head tipped back in frenzied glee.

"Dot, it isn't like that."

Her head snaps up, gaze pointed and intense. "He's lying to you. You think Oliver's this great guy. Uh-uh." Her head shakes back and forth. "He's no better than me." She takes slow steps away from me, finger poking the air between us. "You just wait and see, missy. You'll find out soon enough. You'll get what you deserve."

Then she's gone, sprinting in the opposite direction of where Zoe's car is parked. Shaken and confused, I welcome the cold air tumbling over me, allowing it to slow down my heartbeat and sharpen my thoughts.

I breathe out white, steamy puffs of air, unsure what to make of what just happened. I'm not sure how long I stand there, wrestling with a growing unease that's taken hold of me. Sure, Dot's at the core of it but there's something more.

"Wren." Oliver's voice snaps me out of the daze and he jogs toward me. "What are you still doing here?"

"Uh. Are you done with Zoe's tire?"

He nods and turns to look at the street where a familiar car drives by. "That's Dot."

"Uh-huh," is all I manage to say, still unsure what exactly happened.

His hand settles at the small of my back. "What's wrong? Did she say something to you?"

I bite my bottom lip and nod, her words a loud rumble in my head.

"What did she say?" His fingers press into my tense back muscles.

I turn to face him, needing to watch his expression as I tell him. "She said you were lying."

"About what?"

“She wasn’t specific...everything.” I’m not even sure if I understand what she was talking about. Or why I’m studying Oliver like he’ll somehow make sense of this. We’re talking about Dot, after all.

He scoffs and gently nudges me toward my car. “She never stops, does she?”

I can sense the heat of his gaze on me, and when I look at him, there’s something unsettled, like worry or confusion, taking shape in his features.

My fingers wrap around the door handle, and before I can tug it open, his hand on my elbow stops me. “Wren, you don’t believe her, do you? I’m not lying to you.”

It’s my turn to scoff and vehemently shake my head. “No. Of course not. It’s just...”

Once more my teeth sink into my bottom lip, trying to put my finger on the most disturbing part of my brief encounter with Dot.

He gently prods my elbow, urging me on. “Just what?”

Cocking my head to one side to get a better look at him, the altercation with Dot runs at warp speed through my mind. Of all the puzzling and alarming things she said, one thing prickles at the back of my neck, piercing and incessant.

“Look, I know she’s a liar and malicious...” Suddenly it’s hard to say what I’m thinking out loud. Instinctually, even I want to reject the words.

Oliver stares intently, as if waiting with bated breath. Gah, how do I say this? I don’t want to hurt his feelings or cause any doubt between us. I trust him implicitly, but I can’t ignore this nagging feeling in my gut. “It’s just that Dot seemed so sure of herself.”

Chapter 22

Oliver

Wren pulls back the covers on our bed, and Gretzky bumps his nose into her leg, seeking attention. She runs her hand over his coat and scratches behind his ear.

The silence between us grows like mold, thick and sickening. She hasn't said anything since the library. Now we're getting ready for bed without our usual banter or flirting. It's plain to see Dot rattled her.

I'm a little freaked out too, not so much from Dot's threat—what else is new and we expected this—but the way in which Dot came out of nowhere. The urge to find her and confront her overcame me as we stood in the parking lot.

Wren fervently insisted we go home. She didn't want to see Dot again and even tried to reassure me that she was okay. I believed her, although the longer we go on with this silence and with how aloof she's acting, I'm no longer so sure.

I discard my shirt and toss it onto a chair. "Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?"

She shakes her head and strolls into the closet to change, both dog and cat following her. From there, her voice carries, though muffled and distant. "No, I'm fine."

Next to go are my jeans and socks, then I slide into bed and pull up the covers to my waist. Wren ambles to her side of the bed, avoiding eye contact.

“Wren.” I pause, waiting for her to look at me. It takes longer than it should and even then, her gaze is hesitant and doesn’t quite meet my eyes. “You’re quiet. Is something on your mind?”

“Nothing. I told you everything she said.” She fluffs her pillow and the cat curls up at the end of her side of the bed. “Word for word. I’ve left nothing out.”

“I wasn’t referring to Dot. You brought her up. I only want to know what’s going on in your head.”

Raking both hands through her hair, she sighs and drops onto the bed next to me. “I already told you...there was something different about her. She was still belligerent. Still Dot. I don’t know, there was just something more self-assured, more contained about her. It felt like confidence, like someone who believed in something without a shadow of a doubt. Sorry, it’s hard to explain and doesn’t even make sense to me.”

“Okay. And you got all that from her ramblings? I’m not sure what you mean, but I wasn’t there.” I shrug and grapple with understanding what it was about Dot—apart from her usually bullheaded demeanor—that got under her skin.

Because no matter how she protests and tells me everything is fine, it isn’t.

Unprompted, she turns to face me. “I don’t believe her, Oliver. You don’t have to worry about that. I trust you.”

I try to swallow past the immovable lump in my throat. The one that settled there from her very first look of uncertainty outside the library earlier tonight. “I know.”

But do I?

I want to believe Wren trusts me, and until now, I did. Although it’s hard to when she looks at me like she’s trying to puzzle the pieces together as to what I’m hiding. Why would Dot tell her I’m lying? And about what?

Wren turns off the light and lies on her back next to me. Both of us stare at the ceiling in the dark, not touching or talking, something we always do.

She cuts through the awkward silence stretching between us. “We knew that she would do this, that she would come back at us with something. I guess, in some ways I’m surprised there isn’t more... And maybe that’s it. Maybe I’m waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“Hey.” I slide an arm around her shoulder. “She can’t do anything to us.”

Scooting closer, she lightly kisses my cheek. “I know.”

I should be comforted by the gesture, yet her lackluster response unnerves me. Shaking it off, I tighten my hold. “Remember, I’m meeting with her tomorrow.”

After my announcement at the Grill, I’d texted Dot right away to tell her what I’d done. Telling her face-to-face would’ve been better, but she was still avoiding me. I wanted her to hear it from me first, and I asked to meet and talk about the Nest. Surprisingly, she completely ignored my news and agreed to meet about the business.

“At the Nest, right?”

“Yeah. I’m going to talk to her about ambushing you in the parking lot.”

“No, please don’t. Drop it. For all you know, you might get something similar from her tomorrow. She’ll tell you that I’m lying to you.”

“Hmm.” I slide my hand from her shoulder, down her arm to her hand, and wrap my fingers around hers. “I love you, Wren.”

“I love you too. Night.” She releases my hand and rolls over.

“Night.” I try not to read too much into her giving me her back and close my eyes.

No surprise, I don’t sleep well and wake restless and tired. Wren is still sleeping when I leave for the Nest for a seven a.m. video call with the Mercury Boetiek in Holland. At least things on that front are going well.

Once at work, the call starts on time. The owners, a brother and sister duo, Ton and Famke Pfeiffer, don't waste any time.

The brother, older with salt-and-pepper hair and strong, angular features, is the first to speak. "Oliver, we are very impressed with your samples."

The shipment arrived yesterday based on the tracking information. That's why I was surprised when they emailed me late their time to ask for a meeting. Not sure if it was a good sign or not.

Famke, in her thirties with short black hair in a bob and ruler-straight bangs that on most would seem too short but on her, makes her more attractive, smiles and gushes, "We love the pieces. The craftsmanship is exquisite."

"Thank you. This is great news." I drop my pen on the worktable, not wanting to fidget with it now that I'm brimming with excitement.

The connection is so good, I could almost believe they are in the same room with me.

Ton straightens in his chair. "We want to move forward with this. We think you are a perfect fit for this project."

"Fantastic." I fist punch the air and they both laugh.

"We take it that is a good thing?" Famke asks and doesn't wait for me to respond. "Our lawyer will send you the paperwork to look over. As soon as you sign and send it back, we'll sign and then it's official."

"Great. I will get together with my lawyer once I have the contract and upon satisfaction, I'll get it back to you." As much as I want this deal, I'm not going to promise it's a done deal until I see their terms.

Once more, Ton straightens and comes closer to the screen. "Oliver, we must stress that our timelines are tight. What you will see in the contract in regard to timing is nonnegotiable. If you have any problems with that, it may be a deal-breaker. We want to be up front with you."

“Of course, I appreciate that and I can assure you, I will dedicate all my resources to filling the order on time. If the timelines are a problem, I will let you know.”

“Good.” He claps his hands in front of him and relaxes a bit.

Famke adds, “Wonderful. We’ll be in touch and look forward to doing business with you.”

“Me too. Thank you. Goodbye.”

After the call, the next few hours go by quickly. I try calling Wren with the good news, but the call goes to voicemail. I don’t leave a message and instead send a text.

Me: They loved my samples. A contract is on the way! Looks like this is going to happen.

Almost instantaneously, three little dots dance on my screen. And while I’m glad she’s responding, an icy niggle stirs at the base of my spine. Why didn’t she answer my call?

Not wanting to get ahead of myself, I have to believe there is a simple explanation. Perhaps she was in the shower or driving. I’m still anxious from last night and how things went. My phone pings with her reply.

Wren: That’s amazing. We’ll have to celebrate. xo

Satisfied and looking forward to tonight, I tuck my phone in my back pocket and try to focus on work. It isn’t easy, and I check my personal email every few minutes for the promised contract but so far nothing.

At ten sharp, Dot waltzes into the Nest, wearing one of her more businesslike outfits. A navy pantsuit, her hair in a bun, heels, and makeup. Is she treating this like a proper business meeting?

This bodes well. Maybe for once she’s taking me seriously.

“Hi, Dot.” I put down the tool and wipe my hands. “Thanks for coming.”

“Oliver.” She widens her stance and makes no move to come any farther into the workshop. “What did you want to

talk about?”

“We’ve talked about this before, but I want to buy you out. I still have the paperwork and it’s a very generous price.” I pick up the contract. “I’m even open to a counteroffer, although I’m sure once your lawyer looks this over, they’ll tell you it’s a great deal.” I thrust the papers at her.

She doesn’t take them. Her head lifts higher, chin in the air, and voice haughty. “I tell you what; I will buy *you* out.”

Surprised, though I don’t know why, I jolt back a step. “What? Dot, this is *my* business. These are my custom designs. I hired each and every one of our workers.” We have a factory not too far from here that I manage. “And I’m the one with the contacts to scale up when needed.”

I’m trying to impress upon her what a gross misstep it would be on her part to try and take over the business. She may not like me or want to have anything to do with me—fine—but I *am* the Nest. Not the other way around.

“Hang on a sec.” She places a hand on her hip, chin pointier than before. “Do you think I didn’t learn anything from working with you? That I’m not capable of running a business? I have those contacts too. I know every one of our workers, and I’m the one who sent birthday, condolences, and holiday cards. I know how to run a business. I don’t need you to be successful. We built the Nest together. Kind of ironic considering what we have now is far from any kind of nest.”

Somewhere in her rant, something smacks me in the face and leaves me hopeful and speechless. Dot’s talking about buying me out. Does this mean she’s finally accepted that we are over?

There is satisfaction in this, albeit small. While she may be resigned to the end of us, she still isn’t relinquishing *my* business.

“I won’t walk away from the Nest so easily.” A part of me wants to; it would be less complicated for Wren and me if I did. If I could simply let her buy me out. But it would also

mean only working internationally—which I am prepared to do, if I *have to*.

Knowing Dot the way I do, this would only be the beginning. Once she catches wind of me working abroad, she would likely move into Europe and any other territory I'm operating in and try to undermine me. Dot still in the custom furniture business would only mean trading one bad situation for another.

Her withering glare is all she offers, no counteroffer or anything else. Once again, I put too much hope and faith in her doing the right thing. Why did I kid myself into thinking this meeting would go well?

“Dot, it feels like we're at that stage where we have to go the legal route. If court is how we settle it, so be it.” I cross my arms over my chest.

“Whatever. You do what you must and so will I.” She then marches out the door.

Infuriated and on edge, I call Kendall, my lawyer, to give her a heads-up on the incoming Netherlands contract and my conversation with Dot. I need to strike and I want her advice on my next move. Then I try to focus on work and fail. When lunch rolls around, I walk over to the Grill, welcoming the fresh air and needing company, or at the very least to be surrounded by people who aren't out to get me.

As soon as I enter the restaurant, I notice it—the air shifts, tension spikes, and a fiery current zips through the place. Far too many eyes fall to me. Most are disapproving and judging, gazes sharp as razor blades.

An unnamed voice inside my head tells me to leave, but before I can, Percy rushes toward me. Talon-like, her small hands tighten around my forearms, fingernails digging into my coat. “Oliver, we need to talk now.”

She drags me through the door marked Employees Only, and while away from the gawkers, we aren't alone. A server perches on a bench, probably on her break, on the phone. This doesn't faze Percy.

“You lied.” Her voice is a near yell and her face in flames.

The server whips her head in our direction, eyes startled like a deer caught in the crosshairs of a rifle. She quickly murmurs something into the phone and disappears through a back door.

Percy slams her palm against my chest with enough force that I’m rocked back onto my heels. “Jesus, what are you talking about?”

“You. Lied.” She punctuates each word with a hard smack to my chest.

I bat her arm away from me. “Knock it off, Perce. What the hell is wrong with you? I didn’t lie about anything.”

Alarms blare in my head. It’s the same accusation Dot made against me last night to Wren. What the hell is going on?

She wipes at her nose and sniffs, still incensed. “Really? Guess who you just missed? Who was just in the restaurant copying you with their own big announcement.” She pulls the bar towel from her back pocket and wrings it in her hands. Anger and sorrow storm her features.

“What are you talking about?”

“Dot. She was telling everyone how much of a liar you are. How could you do this to Wren?”

My jaw clenches and a growl rips from my chest. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Explain. Now.”

“She had proof you are the father. A DNA test, and she even had Doc Miller look at it and confirm the results for the entire Grill to see.” Tears now stain her cheeks. “She said how you cheated. You were having an affair with my sister. You’ve made Wren the town pariah. How could you?”

The anguish and heartache in her voice punch my gut as my mind swims with this news.

“None of that is true. Did the doctor come in with her?” I have no reason to believe the doctor would go along with one of Dot’s schemes, but it would certainly explain a few things.

“No. He was already here, having his lunch. She called him out and made him explain what he was looking at.”

“She’s lying.”

Her derisive snort hits me square in the chest. Her expression is pure disbelief. “Before she left, she made a point of letting us all know that she’d be making the rounds.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“She’s going to tell every goddamn business in this town the same thing.”

“And you believe her? Percy, you know me. I’m not lying.”

“I-I want to believe you, but how do you explain this?”

“What does Pop say?” I grasp at the hope that he will know better, have more faith in me.

“He wasn’t here. Thank goodness he’s in Helena visiting some of our suppliers. But when he hears—”

“Percy, I have to go. I have to talk to Wren.”

Chapter 23

Wren

The library door opens and in walks the mayor in his wool coat, hat, and gloves. “Good morning.”

While his words sound pleasant enough, he doesn’t smile. His expression is unreadable as he treks toward the front desk with purpose.

“Good morning, Mr. Mayor, how are you?” I hold out my hand to shake his, heart kicking against my rib cage.

This is it. Is he here to give me the town’s seal of approval for Bright Horizons? Are we finally going to be able to move forward with a public announcement? The funding and everything else that comes with that? I’m anxious to get started on formalizing the family sponsorships.

“I’ve been better.” He doesn’t take my hand, and my heartbeat stops. The vital organ sinks low in my chest. Something is wrong.

I square my shoulders and clasp my hands on the counter in front of me. The mayor removes his gloves and slaps the expensive leather onto the wooden surface. “I hate to be the one to say this, especially after our last conversation, but we’ve hit pause on evaluating your proposal.”

My breath shutters, heart plummeting to my toes as I grip the edge of the desk to prevent myself from falling to my knees. “Pardon? What does that mean?”

“I’m not one to beat around the bush. We’ll more than likely reject your proposal.”

“What?” I come around from behind the desk, cautious not to move too fast. Everything inside me trembles in disbelief. “You said approval of the program was pretty much a done deal. Only a formality.” I rush on, not daring to give him a second to walk out of here without an explanation. “What happened to the great potential you saw for the program? You said Bright Horizons was a great first start in making a difference.”

“Well, all of that is still true.” He picks up his gloves and whacks them against the palm of his other hand.

“Then what’s changed?”

“For now, the program isn’t going to happen. It’s unfortunate, but it doesn’t mean that at a future date...” His lips twist, eyes darting around the library as if searching for the best way to say whatever comes next. So much for getting to the point.

I wait patiently, willing my insides to stay where they belong.

“Perhaps someone else, someone with a different, er, better standing in the community could put forth the proposal.”

“Better standing in the community.” Why do I find myself parroting this man whenever we talk? “What does that even mean?”

“Miss Tyler, I don’t know you very well.” Lips pursed, he dips his head, eyes falling to his shiny, Italian loafers.

I want to scream and cry, but with all my might, I keep my composure. I will only make things worse if I lose it.

His head lifts and his gaze stabs me. “Before today I had heard only good things about you. Great things even. And today’s news... What I learned, it’s quite upsetting.” He tsk and shakes his head in reproach, and on instinct, I blush. “As soon as I heard, I tried to call an emergency meeting of the city council, but it wasn’t to be. Instead I had to make phone calls to all the members. I spoke to as many as were available. They all echoed the same sentiment.”

I hang on his every word, feeling blindfolded and endlessly spun around, unable to make heads or tails of anything. “What sentiment?”

“We don’t believe that someone like you should be running the library. You don’t represent the family values we hold dear, that we expect of public figures. And while you’re not an elected official, you are a representative of this community, nonetheless.”

I suck in a breath, stomach muscles spasming, afraid to ask for clarification. I already dread what I’ve gathered he means from his stupid, convoluted political speak. All he does is beat around the bush, and the image of me beating him with his shiny leather gloves flashes before me. Tempting, but likely it would only prove his point.

“Mayor Malone, please be frank. I want to be sure I understand you. What exactly do you mean about my job?”

I have so many more questions, but I need to know if I’m being fired first.

“Well, while nothing is official about the librarian role... soon, you may no longer have this position. We don’t think you’re the right person.”

A horse couldn’t have kicked me harder in the stomach, and I stagger back in shock. My fingers grip the desk, and I lean on it for support.

“What am I being accused of?”

Suddenly affronted, he slides on his gloves and refuses to look at me. “I don’t care to repeat it. It’s quite upsetting, especially considering my daughter is involved. She was a victim for lack of a better word. Dorothy would hate me stating it as such, but that is what it is.”

“A victim? Dot?” I press my lips together.

I have to stop any disparaging words I so want to utter about his daughter from tumbling out of my mouth. What is happening? What has Dot done now?

“Mayor Malone, I’m afraid I don’t understand. What do you think I have done?”

“Really? You can cut this innocent act. Everyone knows you’ve been having an affair with Oliver. He’s engaged to my daughter, for goodness’ sake. They’ve been together for years.” He bends and tilts his head to catch my gaze and glowers at me. “She’s pregnant. How could you?”

I feel the rush of blood to my cheeks as shame threatens to burn me alive. It doesn’t even matter that he has the facts wrong. Bordering on a drought, all the saliva in my mouth has dried up.

I struggle to get the words out, to tell him like it really is. “No. No. It wasn’t like that. They weren’t together. The engagement was called off two years before.”

“And you believed that?” He frowns, pity swimming in the depths of his gaze. “Really, Miss Tyler? I thought you were smarter than that. He lied to you.”

“No. No. He’d never do that. And the baby...the baby isn’t his.” Every word out of my mouth is sharp and cutting as shards of glass.

Even as I realize no matter what I say to this man, his mind is already made up, I can’t stop myself from trying to get through to him and make him see the truth.

“Are you really this desperate to believe that too? Another lie.”

“No, but—” Hot and a little dizzy, it seems to me like the world tilts on its axis and nothing is as it should be.

“Stop. Now you’re embarrassing yourself, and frankly, I’m more than uncomfortable. Not that my daughter should have to and yet, she has DNA tests to prove Oliver is the father of her unborn child.”

Just then, Oliver rushes into the library. The sight of him brings a tidal wave of relief at the same time as nausea.

The baby is his? No, it can’t be.

The mayor stiffens and his expression swiftly turns glacial. “Well, if this isn’t proof that we’ve made the right decision.” He flicks up the collar of his coat and shoots daggers at me, then Oliver. “You two deserve each other.”

At this point, I’m ready for the man to leave. He just ripped my life in two, and I can’t take much more of this. But he isn’t done.

He marches up to Oliver, who’s flushed, gaze tumultuous, and says in a strong, commanding tone, “You will do right by my daughter, young man, and we will talk soon. You’re a disgrace.” Without another word, he strides from the library.

Oliver stands several feet from me, looking as ashen and sickly as I feel. He approaches, cautious and shaken. “You know, don’t you?”

I recoil from his outstretched hand. Of all the things he could say, his confirmation of what Bill Malone told me slams into me with the force of a ten-ton truck.

“God, no. Really? How...how could you lie to me?” Tears leak from my eyes. I’m unable to stop them and my vision blurs.

Oliver’s an obscure and grainy outline in front of me both metaphorically and literally. Not only am I not able to fully see him, but everything I believed to be real and solid about this man, no longer feels so. Can I count on Oliver and what we’re trying to build? The barbed question stabs at my heart. This can’t be happening.

I scurry backward as he grabs for me. “Wren, what? I didn’t lie.”

He grips my biceps and holds me firmly in front of him even as I thrash to get away from him. But it’s more than just him. I want to run away from this ugly truth that I’ve unwittingly taken part in. “Oliver, please, let me go.”

“No. Wait.” He bends his head, face coming close to mine, making me look at him. “Wren, what did he say?”

“You’re the baby’s father.” I wriggle in his hold. “There are DNA results.” My lips tremble, slick with tears. “Why

would you lie to me?”

Shocked or perhaps dejected that he’s been found out, Oliver carefully releases me. I stumble backward, needing room between us.

“No, Wren, listen to me. Dot’s lying. I don’t know how she did it or if the tests are even legitimate, but I’m not the father.” His hands curl into fists at the center of his chest. “She’s lying. I swear on my life. I’d never lie to you.”

“But...but...” I trail off, urgently trying to gather my wits and slow my thoughts. A tiny spark of hope flickers bright in my chest. “How is this possible? Malone said he saw the results. He said you two weren’t over and that you lied about that too.”

“No.” He takes my hand in his. “That isn’t true. Think about it. All of this, it’s Dot. This is retaliation for me calling her out publicly. She’d been too quiet. We knew she might do something. This is it. I can’t explain the DNA. I want to see the test results with my own two eyes. It’s got to be a fake.”

I wipe my nose with the back of my hand and try to steady my breathing, stop the tears. Most of this makes sense. Dot was too quiet, absent after his announcement at the Grill. Then last night, the library.

“Oliver, last night when she talked to me, this is what she meant. She planned this. Most probably went to her father distraught and... Wait, how do you know about the DNA tests?”

He fills me in on his visit with her this morning and how useless it was, then his drop-in at the Grill for lunch. I gasp, mouth open, stomach roiling, as he describes Percy confronting him.

“And Pop?” The thought of my father, the disappointment and anger he must feel at not only Oliver but also me, devastates me. “What did he say?”

“He wasn’t there. He doesn’t know yet.”

“I didn’t tell you all of it. The mayor didn’t only come to talk about Dot.”

This isn't going to be easy to voice—losing all that I've worked for and that I've failed Jack, and Courtney, and Brayden.

“What else did he say?”

“Bright Horizons isn't going to be approved and I...” My voice cracks and he tightens his grip on my hand, hauling me into him. “They're going to fire me.”

“What? They can't do that.” He presses his lips to my forehead in comfort despite how wrong he is.

“They can and they will.”

I fill him in on my conversation with the mayor, and once done, I crumple into another wave of tears. There's nothing I can do about Bright Horizons or my job, not now. But the more I think about the pregnancy and what I know of Oliver, of course I know it's a lie.

Oliver is telling the truth.

A charged knowing blankets me, persistent and prickly. Yet it's out of my reach, like something on the tip of my tongue and I can't quite form the words or the thought.

Then it smacks me in the face.

“Wait. Dot and Kellen. I still think there's something there. Do you think he helped her with the DNA results? Maybe he isn't the father and what I saw wasn't an argument over the paternity, but maybe payment for faking DNA results?”

I'm reaching, and every word out of my mouth sounds bizarre and unfathomable.

“Maybe. Faking results is something Kellen could do. He'd know a guy who knows a guy...” Oliver stares off into the middle distance, most probably working this out from all angles like I am.

A woman enters the library, one of Lara Crandall's followers, and stops short when she spots Oliver and me. Then she makes a big display of clutching her chest, mouth open, before she turns and leaves.

I groan and drop my head into my hands briefly. “You know she’s going to make this into something it isn’t. Embellish what she saw.”

He scratches the stubble on his chin. “Yeah. We better get used to that.”

“This is only the beginning.” I wipe the tears from my face and slide in behind the desk. “Please go.”

“Wren, can’t you get someone to cover for you?”

“What? No. Wouldn’t that be perfect? Even more proof that I’m not fit for the job. I leave whenever I like. I might as well resign right now.”

“That isn’t what I mean.” He rubs at his forehead. “I just think we should talk. Go find Dot together. Clear this all up.”

Bile bubbles up the back of my throat at the notion of confronting Dot. Given my current state, I’m not so sure I can trust myself to be calm. I might pull out all her hair.

“This isn’t going to be easily resolved.” A dark snort sails past my lips. “I can’t leave. I won’t.” I sound harsher than I intend, but I’m also miffed that he’d even suggest such a thing. “We’ll talk later. I have to stay. If I have any chance of keeping this job, I can’t run at the first sign of trouble.”

We stare at each other, both determined to stand our ground, and thankfully, Oliver finally backs down. I steel my spine and watch him leave the library, resolved to finish the day.

Chapter 24

Oliver

Hurricane Dot continues the next day, leaving devastation and destruction in her wake. The night before, I waited for Wren to come home. She was later than usual and I tried calling and texting, but she never answered.

Once she did get home, the evening was touch and go, rocky at best. We barely spoke, but at least we didn't fully turn away from one another. After dinner, which both of us hardly ate, we went to bed where we found each other in the dark and made love.

It was feral and frenetic. Kisses bruising, far too much teeth. Nails biting, hands strong and groping. Strokes urgent and fast. Then we fell asleep with our bodies entwined. Even still, I'm filled with dread. Last night felt a lot like the beginning of the end, and I won't accept that.

Eddie leans against the door to the Nest as I stroll up the walkway, coffee in one hand and keys dangling from my fingers. I give him a quick nod; that's all the greeting I can muster. There's no point in asking if he too has heard all the wonderful things about me and the woman I love. He has. It's written on the deep, downturned lines marring his brow and the grim line of his mouth.

Silently, he follows me inside and watches me place my phone on the desk, hit a button to dial into my work voicemail, and then press speaker so I can continue setting up for the day.

Out of the tiny phone, I pause at the first bitter voice that vomits into my workspace. There are at least a dozen

messages like that from clients, old and new. Most are outraged and disgusted with me.

Word has spread fast and wide about my supposed infidelity and how I'm shirking my responsibilities as a father. Some of the calls are even from a few who live beyond the Winslow Grove town line. All of them demand I do the right thing.

The final message is from a long-standing and repeat customer, Mr. Goodrow, his thunderous parting words a low blow that makes my legs weaken. "I thought we were finally rid of the Winslow scoundrel when your father died. Although, unlike with him, where my hands were tied, I'll have nothing to do with you. That old saying is true. The apple doesn't fall too far from the tree. You've everything like Merrick Winslow. Such a shame."

My brother catches my flinch as the message ends. Clearly there are still some people around that were very aware of my father's true colors.

Eddie's features harden as he stares me down. "Don't fucking listen to him. You're nothing like him. Don't let these assholes run you out of business. What are you going to do about this? Everything you've worked for is now on the line. Dot's dangerous."

He's trying to light a fire under me, and yet, I feel like all the light has gone out. Well, except for Wren. Thank fuck for Wren.

Eddie glares expectantly, having no patience for my silence, and I snap, fingers balling into fists, tendons in my neck taut.

"What do you want me to do? What? I've got to clear my name, and I can't see a way in doing that. If you've got any bright ideas, now would be a good time to share."

"Hey, relax. You gotta do what needs to be done to make this go away."

My scathing grunt causes him to bristle, and some of my anger drains from me. "I freaking created this crap."

He folds his arms, eyes pinned to me, and stays silent. I know him well. He isn't backing down or letting me off the hook. His gaze bores into me, clearly conveying everything I already know.

This thing with Dot, call it a war or whatever, won't end until there is a victor. Dot is out for blood, to win at all costs, and for me to even stand a chance of walking away with something, I need to keep fighting. Everything I was taught not to do from my father.

My father, the fucking hypocrite. He claimed to live under a halo of virtue, and my mess is nothing compared to his. Or is it?

That doesn't matter. I am not my father. Never have been and I won't let the people of Winslow Grove think that I am.

After Wren and I talked yesterday, I tried to deal with this discreetly, to find Dot and talk to her. I called, texted, and even went to the house, but nothing. She wasn't responding, and at the house, I couldn't go inside to see if she was hiding in there, even if I wanted to. She changed the locks.

I spent the late afternoon searching town for her, checking out her usual haunts. No one had seen her, though I suspect no one would've told me even if they knew where she was.

I received a chilly reception, at best, from everyone I talked to. Then I switched tactics and tried to find Kellen. I planned to make him talk, to explain why he was talking to Dot the day Wren saw them. It turns out, Kellen's left town.

The front door slaps against the wall and Mr. Levine barges in. "Oliver, cancel my order." He brandishes his finger like a weapon.

"Mr. Levine, it's almost finished. It's got one more coat and then I was going to call you."

"I don't want it. I want nothing from here, and you will no longer get any of my business, much less anyone else's in this town."

"You can't..." I start to say, but he leaves just as abruptly as he arrived.

Eddie blows out a harsh breath. “Oliver, stop the bleeding before this gets out of hand. You’re going to lose business left and right the longer this goes on.”

“Thanks, Captain Obvious.”

Despite my sarcasm, he chuckles. “I can only imagine how hard this is for you. You’ll figure this out, and I’m here if you need me. I’ll tell anybody that dares say shit about you that they don’t know what they’re talking about.”

I scrub a hand down my face. “Thanks. I know I’m not alone. It means a lot.”

“Anytime, bro, anytime. How are things with Wren?”

“They’re okay. I don’t know how to prove the child isn’t mine when Dot’s supposedly got results that say otherwise. I’ve tried talking to Dot, to lay my eyes on these DNA test results, but she’s hiding.”

“Well if that doesn’t tell you something, I don’t know what would. And Wren, how’s she doing with all this?”

I rub at the back of my neck, chest aching at the pain and damage I’ve caused her. “She’s getting just as much hate as I am. She may lose her job because of this, and the program she submitted to the town is going to get rejected.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“I know, and I think with the results and everything, Wren may be doubting me.”

“Give her time. She’ll come around.” He shoves a hand into the pocket of his jeans. “Hey, I can’t blame her. When I first heard the news, I thought, ‘please don’t tell me my little brother is that stupid to get Dot Malone pregnant.’”

“Shut up.” I toss a random piece of paper at him.

This time he belts out a laugh. “Well, my work is done here. I’ll leave you to this.” He saunters toward the door. “Bro, I’m here for you and will help in any way. Just say the word.”

I tear my gaze from the dining table in the far corner of the workshop—Levine’s dining table—and wonder how I’m

going to recoup the cost. The materials, time, and money I stand to lose.

To make matters worse, because he was a long-standing customer, when he insisted I not only design it but also build it rather than get someone at the factory to do it, I readily obliged.

“Thanks. I appreciate you coming by, and I know you’ve got my back.” As my brother pushes through the door, I shiver at the brisk outside air as a dark thought springs to mind. “Listen, Eddie, you tell me if you get any backlash because of this.”

His garage has been a staple in town since I was a toddler. My brother is well respected and damn good at his job. He’s successful in his own right, and I’d hate for my garbage to impact his business.

“Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.” He tips two fingers at me in goodbye and then he’s gone.

At the same time, the laptop rings with an incoming video call. I sprint to the desk although I don’t have anything planned. On the screen, Ton and Famke Pfeiffer wait for me to answer.

The contract. I’d forgotten all about it with the chaos of yesterday. Last I checked, nothing had come in. I accept the video.

“Hey Famke, Ton. How are you?” I quickly flip from video to email in case I missed the contract, but nothing has come in from them since we last talked.

“Oliver. We’re going to get to the point.” Ton’s tone brokers no room for pleasantries and I’m immediately alarmed.

“What’s wrong?”

“We got a call from your business partner after we sent the contract.”

Contract? Business partner? What are they talking about?
“I never received a contract.”

“Yes, we realize that now. We sent the email to the Nest in error.”

Like witnessing someone dig my own grave, a shudder skitters through me. Dot saw the contract and most likely deleted the email because I go into the Nest email many times a day and never saw anything from them.

Shit. Dot knows about the deal.

When I first started talking with Mercury, I specifically told them not to contact me through the Nest even if that was how they originally found me.

Ton’s abrasive tone slices through my alarming thoughts. “After talking to your business partner, we have concerns.”

Maybe I can still salvage this. “What business partner? I don’t—”

Famke cuts me off, “Dorothy Malone.”

“No.” I want to deny Dot in every possible way, but our partnership in the Nest can be verified. “We used to be partners. She has nothing to do with this deal. What concerns do you have?”

I need to know what Dot said. It’s the only way I can put their worries to rest.

“We know the truth.” Ton’s solemn expression only amplifies the direct hit of that damn word.

Truth. If I have to hear that word flung at me like shit in my eyes one more time, I’m going to destroy something. Every time it’s said, it’s another nail in the coffin of me, the fucking liar.

“What truth are you talking about?”

“You lied. You are not equipped to take on our job. You do not have the people nor the resources, and if we got into business with you, we would be making a grave mistake.” Famke plays with a paper clip, dismantling it like this conversation is slowly doing to my professional dreams.

“None of that is true.” I pause to rein in the desperation in my tone. “I am fully equipped and ready to fulfill your order.”

“Well, I’m afraid we can’t take you at your word.” Ton crosses his arms, his features severe. “It’s too much of a risk, and like I said at the outset of our conversations and most recently during our last call, if you can’t make our timeline, there is no deal.”

“Wait. Talk to my lawyer. She can assure you of the validity of my claim. I will sign the contract and whatever else you want me to sign. That should show you that I believe wholeheartedly in myself and my business. My word is good.”

Famke places her elbows on the table and gives me a pitying smile. “Unfortunately, it’s too late for that. We’ve signed with another contractor. We had truly wanted to work with you. We love your designs, your vision, but you are not the right person for this job. Goodbye, Oliver. We wish you all the best.”

She doesn’t wait for my response, and the screen blips to black. And just like that, the opportunity I had to help me battle Dot for the Nest is gone like a puff of smoke.

I stare at the black screen, a void just like my career. Save for Wren, my life is slowly becoming one black dump. What the hell did I do to deserve this? Why is Dot filled with such hatred that she would go to these great lengths to make me suffer?

There’s only one final play for my career—take Dot to court for full ownership of the Nest. I dread what comes next and worse, what other lies my ex might have up her sleeve.

It feels like everywhere I turn, someone is angry at me. Disgusted by me. Doubting me. Wren included even if she won’t admit it.

She believes me, I don’t doubt that, but being together has been one battle after another. Now the DNA results plus losing her job and Bright Horizons. All of this kills me. I won’t lose Wren too.

We are meant to be together. No one else fits me like she does.

And because of this, I will do everything in my power to salvage things and keep us together, though I don't have a solution in sight.

Chapter 25

Wren

“**M**iss Tyler, this isn’t your fault.” Courtney grabs my hand across the table and grips it tightly. “You didn’t do anything wrong. We would never blame you.”

“You’re sweet.” I pat her hand and force a fleeting smile. “As much as I’d like to believe you, unfortunately it doesn’t matter if I didn’t do anything wrong; my actions caused this.”

After the mayor and Oliver left yesterday, I would’ve liked to curl up in the fetal position and bawl my eyes out over the rejection of my proposal and impending job loss, but I couldn’t. I had work to do.

First, I called Reggie and asked her to come to the library. That kind of news shouldn’t be delivered over the phone. She arrived just before school let out and I told her everything, through snot and tears. We agreed that I should be the one to tell her kids, and I texted them last night to come to the library right after school today.

My heart broke as I told them what had happened. As much as I wanted to leave things out, like my involvement with Oliver and Dot, I didn’t. While I didn’t tell all, I gave them enough for them to understand there was a lot more at play here than the merit of the Bright Horizons program.

Brayden kicks out his legs and glances up from his phone. “Court’s right, though. You did nothing wrong. They’re assholes.”

“Bray,” Court admonishes, cheeks reddening at the same time I say, “Language.”

“Sorry, Miss Tyler, it’s just stupid.” He drops his phone onto the table. “You said something about a work-around. What did you mean by that?”

“Yes.” I slide the nicely bound proposal packet in front of them. “This is the official proposal I submitted to the city council. This, as it’s laid out here, currently is not a go. This means no city funding or potential support from the state. More importantly, what we’ve lost is the credibility that would come with the town’s backing. It would’ve made things easier when we approach local businesses and charitable foundations for funding. It would’ve also helped with grant applications.”

In a zealous fit of hope, I toss the proposal across the table and it flies into the air, only to drop onto the floor. The teens laugh, staring at me puzzled.

“We’re going to forget about that for now.” I try to sound confident despite a million doubts and what-if scenarios crowding my brain.

“I don’t understand what the problem is if we don’t need that.” Brayden points to the packet on the floor.

“For now, we have the fundraisers and family sponsors. It’s a solid start but not enough.” I watch Courtney gather her long, curly hair and tie it off her face.

The idea of spelling out for them that the town fundraisers may dry up if this situation with Dot doesn’t get resolved quickly and how critical it is that we have the family sponsors makes me sick.

“What happens if we lose the sponsors and no one supports the fundraisers?” Jack’s been quiet throughout the discussion, and I wonder how he’s really taking it. Although, if his questions are any indication, he truly gets how dire this could be. Both things are possible.

“We’re not there yet. I have to talk to each family and plan on doing that over the next couple of days.”

More than likely, the families have already heard from someone in the town, if not the mayor or a member of city council. While their names were not submitted with the proposal, some of the families have been vocal about their involvement with the program. Lara Crandall comes to mind, but I don't have the heart to mention all of this to them. I've already delivered enough bad news for one day.

"And the fundraisers?" Courtney chews on her nail.

"Let's think positively for now." My small smile doesn't quite muster one from any of them and I sigh. "I'm really sorry."

I can't seem to stop apologizing. No matter what I tell them, I'm failing them. "I promise you we'll make your first year of college work. Somehow, some way. And each year after will get better. That's my goal." I reach out and take Jack's hand and Courtney's. In turn, she takes Brayden's. "I believe in this program, and I believe in the three of you."

"We believe in you too. You've always had our backs and we've got yours. You're the best." Courtney springs up from the table and comes around to give me a hug. "We love you."

"I love you too." I swallow back tears.

Tears of joy for their understanding and tears of sadness. It all comes down to the fact that I've failed them before they've even gone off to college. And I guess in some ways, that's what life is about. Realizing that not everything works out the way you want it to and you've got to adapt if nothing else. That's what I hope they take away from this. That and to never give up.

She squeezes me tight one more time and Brayden mock groans, stiffly smiling. "Hey, Miss Tyler, what she said." His aversion to anything touchy-feely makes me laugh, and they join in.

"I gotta go." Court grabs her bag, likely headed for her part-time shift at the Grill.

The chair legs scrape against the floor as Brayden pushes back his chair and stands. "I'll walk with you. Maybe Pop will

give me some fries.” He licks his lips and I can’t help but smile.

Oddly enough, when most adults are running for the hills, my father has always had a soft spot for teenagers. Once I hit my teens, Pop and I hit our groove and things improved. I suppose it also had a lot to do with Percy being older too. I no longer had to play the mom.

“You coming, Jack?” Brayden’s question brings me back to the present, and I watch him walk alongside Court to the door.

“No. I’m going to stay for a while.” Jack rakes his dark hair off his forehead and waits for his friends to leave before looking to me.

“Hey, how are you doing with this?” Jack is a few months shy of eighteen but he’s a sage, old soul. I shouldn’t have favorites—I love all three kids dearly—yet Jack has a special place in my heart. It could be because I’ve known him the longest. He was the first of the three to live with Reggie and we bonded easily, but it’s something more than that.

Jack’s the kind of kid who will easily suffer in silence, accept being overlooked, rather than make waves. “I’m good. Okay with this. I have complete faith in you.”

I choke out a jagged laugh, warmed by his confidence and also feeling woefully undeserving. “Thanks, I think.”

He shakes his head and gives me an unimpressed look. “You’ll make it work. I know you will.” He gets up from the table, still staring at me. “Miss Tyler, tell me how I can help you. Please.”

“I will. Right now all I need is for you to keep doing what you’re doing.”

He snorts and pulls on my hand. “Let me treat you to a coffee.”

“Jack, I can’t. The library’s open for another hour.” While we close early today, I can’t just lock up and leave even if we’re the only ones here.

“Hey, I’ve got you covered.” He raises his voice, and a few seconds later, I realize he was cueing someone from the back. “Reg will lock up.”

I want to protest when Jack grabs his bag and Reggie nears us. Her smile is small and almost smug as is Jack’s. They’re both proud to have pulled one over on me.

Shrugging, I get up. “You know what, let’s do it.”

Although I don’t want to say it out loud, make it more real than it already is, I am resigned to the fact that no matter how good I am at my job, I will likely lose Winslow Grove’s librarian position.

Maybe she sees something on my face, or perhaps just because she’s got that motherly instinct, Reggie pulls me in for a quick hug. “You kids go have fun.”

Jack chuckles and pulls the door open, waiting for me to catch up. We walk shoulder to shoulder down the sidewalk toward Beyond the Cake. The small bakery has about a dozen small bistro tables for people to sit, sip a coffee, and eat a slice of cake or pie or whatever their sweet tooth craves.

I try to ignore the people stopping in their tracks to sneer at us, and Jack does a good job of not letting on that he’s noticed. There’s no way he hasn’t.

Just outside the bakery, from behind us, someone calls my name and I glance over my shoulder. Oliver jogs to catch up to us, face splitting into a smile.

His smile alone does something, melts away some of the tension and horror of the past twenty-four hours. He holds out his arm for a hug, and without any regard for being in public or anything else, I throw my arms around his neck.

The feel of him, strong and warm and solid against me, is electrifying. Both soothing and exciting and just what I need. My body melts into him as if he can take the weight of not only me, but everything else that’s gone wrong. Erase everything so all that’s left is a clean slate.

“I just missed you at the library.” He releases me with a kiss on my cheek.

An older woman skirts around us on the sidewalk and makes a point of glaring back at me, tsking.

Suddenly, for the first time since the gym, that ugly, unwanted sensation—the one I used to constantly get when I went out of my way to prevent a run-in with Oliver—slithers back into the pit of my stomach. As if I’m doing something wrong and must avoid him at all costs. As if I’m a bad person.

“Hey, Jack.” Oliver doesn’t catch the woman’s glare, or if he does, he chooses to ignore it. “What are you two doing?”

Jack hesitates, peering into Beyond the Cake as if because of Oliver’s sudden appearance, our plans have changed and there’s no point in even going in.

“Uh, Jack was taking me for a coffee.” With my tone, I try to convey to Oliver that Jack wants this to be a one-on-one kind of thing.

Unfortunately, he doesn’t pick up on any of it. “Oh, I could use a coffee.” He pulls the door from Jack, opening it wider. “You don’t mind if I join you, do you?”

Despite the question, there really is only one answer, and I catch Jack’s grimace before his expression slides into neutral. “Sure.”

The three of us stroll inside, and from behind the cash register, Mrs. Parker waves hello and points at an empty table. Internally, I gush with gratitude. At least she didn’t treat me any different—judgemental like others—or worse, turn me away.

Jack drops his bag on the ground next to his chair. “What will you have?”

He looks at me, smile small, trying to make the best of this three’s a crowd situation.

Smiling brightly, I remove my coat and pull out a chair for him. “A coffee. Cream and sugar.”

“And to eat?” Jack remains standing.

“Oh, I’m okay.”

“Come on. How about a brownie? I’m having one.” The tall, muscled man-boy grins down at me and there’s no way I can say no.

“All right. Twist my rubber arm.” I laugh at my poor joke, not realizing the double entendre until Oliver joins in.

He squeezes my shoulder, gaze softening further. This man. He’s my best friend. My Twist. Never mind how big the hurdles or how many there are to be with him, he’s worth it.

Jack watches us uncomfortably, clearly missing the inside joke, and I internally cringe. *I’m here with Jack. Oliver’s an added bonus. I must behave myself. No more googly eyes.*

“Let me get it.” Oliver slings his coat over the chair. “Seeing as I crashed your thing, it’s the least I can do.”

Okay, he wasn’t completely oblivious to the situation, and my insides warm at his gesture. Jack falters, fidgeting from one foot to the other, and I worry we might have offended him.

Eventually, he relents. “Fine. Thanks.”

“Good.” Oliver claps his hands together and strolls to the counter.

“Sorry about Oliver.” I don’t like the way it sounds coming out of my mouth, but I feel the need to apologize for my boyfriend crashing our little get-together.

Jack shrugs like he couldn’t care less. “It’s cool.”

He slumps into the chair and glances around. With no conversation, it’s far too easy to pick up other chatter, and once again, I try to block out the hushed whispers from one of the nearby tables. Two teenage girls snicker and point. Jack pauses, gaze on them, and from where I’m sitting, it’s hard to read his expression.

Whatever the look, the girls stop talking and he turns to me. “Doesn’t that bother you?”

“Um...uh.” Nerves churn inside me. “Yes. I’ve never had this happen to me before.”

“Not even in school?”

“No. I was lucky to go about my business. Let’s ignore them.”

He scrunches his face, probably not satisfied with my advice. Just then a young couple brush past our table. The woman bumps into the back of my chair with enough force that it moves a bit.

Before I can think it was an accident, she whispers, “Cheater.”

A chill skitters up my spine and my insides turn to ice. The harassment doesn’t end there. Next is the man she’s with. He isn’t so discreet when he passes. Loud enough for Jack’s eyes to nearly pop out of his skull, the man mutters, “Whore.”

The teenager across from me jumps to his feet. Eyes feral and fists at the ready, Jack blocks the man’s path. “What did you say?”

A few inches taller than Jack but not as muscled, the twenty-something man has a look about him. Stocky, with two bumps on the bridge of his crooked nose where it was likely broken. If I had to guess, he’s a bruiser, and whatever this is quickly becoming with Jack, the man welcomes the opportunity to hit someone.

I stand, not willing to let this escalate into a fight, and the next thing I know, Oliver is there.

Hastily depositing our plates on the table with a clatter, he pushes his way between the two. “Hey, what happened?”

Rocky-the-wannabe’s girlfriend creates a commotion, hands flailing around her as she squeals, “Leave him alone.”

All three of us ignore her as Jack, red-faced, glares at the bully boyfriend while answering Oliver. “He called...” the poor teen sputters, clearly not wanting to repeat the nasty word. “He was trash talking Miss Wren.”

Oliver’s darkening gaze finds mine, and I’m not sure what he sees, but it’s enough for him to grab the man by his jacket and haul him close. The men are maybe two inches apart, and in a low and gruff voice, Oliver demands, “Apologize to the

lady.” His handsome face has morphed into something grim and threatening.

The guy snorts and screws up his already mean face. “Don’t see no lady.”

Oliver growls, tightening his grip, and Jack shuffles forward at the man’s insolence.

I pull on Jack’s shirt and wrench his shoulder toward me so he’s forced to look at me. “Please let this go. He’s not worth the trouble. It’s okay.”

As the final words slip from my mouth, I realize my mistake and also feel to my core how very wrong they are.

Nothing about this is *okay*.

It’s never okay for someone to toss angry, hateful words at another. Especially when this man doesn’t know me or my situation yet he finds it so easy to judge.

Oliver hauls the man by his coat collar, girlfriend still shrieking behind them, out of the bakery.

Chapter 26

Oliver

Still somewhat shaken, Wren enters her house on autopilot, completely ignoring both Gretzky and Jordan's greeting. Usually, she is just as excited to see them with loving words, pets, and nuzzles. Instead, she wanders into the kitchen with her coat still on.

"You okay?" I follow and tug at her sleeve to stop her.

She peers over her shoulder "I don't know. It feels like everything is falling apart when it should be the opposite. We're finally together."

She pulls off her coat and drops it, right there on the floor. To be expected, Jordan prances over, kneads the wool, and then plunks down onto it. The cat is at home as if the jacket was put there just for him.

"Hey, things are rough right now, but the good thing is, we're still together." I pull her into my side and she rests her head in the crook of my neck.

I'm not sure the idea of us together brings much comfort when I seem to bring so much anguish and pain along for the ride. It's because of me that she's facing all of this. Yet the warmth of her breath and her familiar scent help to settle the storm brewing within me. I can only hope I do half as much for her.

When Jack told me in greater detail what the couple had said about Wren at the bakery, I wanted a do-over. I had been too calm and rational with the big-mouthed jerk, and now more than ever I wish I'd punched him.

All day I'd had a similar reception with jeers and whispers from people around town. I hadn't stopped to think Wren would be subjected to the same. I'd done this. I'd brought this spite and trouble into her life.

"I love you." I grab both of her hands. "I'll fix this."

"I love you too, but I don't see how you can. Whether alone or together, everywhere we go, someone feels it's their right to cast a disparaging look or comment. It's only going to get worse once you get the Nest and word gets out that I've been fired. They'll say how horrible you are for treating Dot like that and that I got what I deserved."

"No. That isn't true." I dip my head to meet her eyes. "We did nothing wrong."

"I know that. That's what hurts the most. Everyone is so quick to believe all of Dot's lies." She looks lost and discouraged.

How do I tell her the Mercury deal fell through and about the customers I've lost? It'll only reinforce what she's thinking and add to how terrible she already feels.

Once I've unloaded everything that happened today, she worries her bottom lip and stares up at me, eyes glassy. "Oliver, what are you going to do? The Netherlands job was your way of getting around the noncompete and more importantly, getting the money to buy the Nest."

I nod and bring her by the hand to sit next to me on the couch in the living room. "Yeah. While Eddie's still willing to loan me the money to buy her out, it looks like I'll have to take Dot to court for ownership of the Nest."

"How did Dot even find out about the deal?"

"You're never going to believe it. Apart from physically being at the Nest when I came up with my designs, sent a few emails or took a call or two, I went to great lengths to keep this deal from her. I didn't use any of the Nest's equipment or materials. The laptop, phone, and anything else were all my personal stuff or I paid out of my own pocket. I didn't even build the samples at the workshop. I rented space because I

didn't want to risk Dot finding out or saying that because I did things using the Nest's resources, the job was hers too. And none of it mattered in the end, the owners of Mercury sent the contract to the Nest's email in error. That's how she found out."

"Oh no. What a mess." She slumps back into the sofa.

I turn toward her and our knees brush as I take her hands in mine. She stares at where we are joined, refusing to look at me. It hurts but I get it. This is all a lot.

"Listen, I've been thinking." My thumbs rub tiny circles on the top of her hands, gently massaging, needing to soothe her in any way possible. "Well, more than thinking about Bright Horizons, and well, I kind of did something that I think you'll be okay with..."

"What?"

"I called Jett Kincaide today about his offer to support the program."

Her brows knit together and climb. "What? You did?"

"Yeah. He'd already heard rumblings of what's going on with us and the program."

Her slight buoyancy from a moment ago quickly deflates. "Oh my God, we're never going to be able to get away from this."

"Hang on now. We are and we will. Jett didn't care about any of that. He doesn't believe it. In fact, we spoke today and he has something he wants to share with you."

"He does? What?"

"Well, let's call him." I take out my phone and hit redial on Jett's number.

When I'd gone to the library earlier today, I had planned on telling Wren the good news then. But I didn't, not wanting to intrude any more than I already had on Jack's good intentions.

Jett had been waiting for our phone call, and I texted him to move our conversation to later today. During our earlier call, I'd offered him the opportunity to tell Wren the good news. It only seemed fair given he was injecting a second life into the program. He surprised me and said let's do it together.

"Hey, Winslow, is Wren with you?" Jett's voice booms through my phone speaker.

"Hi, Jett. Yes, I have Wren with me and I told her you've got news."

"Alright then. Hey, Wren, how are you?"

"Hi, Jett. I've been better." Her fingers tighten their grip on mine. "What's this about you two talking?"

"Yeah. Your man called me today about supporting Bright Horizons. First off, I don't give a damn about all those busybodies and the bullshit rumors, so we're not going to spend another second talking about it. You hear me?"

"Uh-huh. Thank you."

"Good. Now, I'd already mentioned the program and a few ideas to my brothers and sisters since seeing you at the bake sale. Then today, after Oliver and I talked, I went to them to vote on it." He pauses and though he can't see her, it proffers the desired effect. Wren holds her breath, only exhaling when he continues, "Unanimously, they agreed to sponsor the program."

"What do you mean sponsor?" The corners of her lips tease an upward lift. Her happiness feels hesitant as if she dare not get ahead of herself.

"Canyon Spring Ranch wants to make a sizable donation in exchange for some kind of partnership. We'll have to meet to figure out the details, and we can do it as soon as possible."

"Can you tell me a little more about what you have in mind?" Wren worries her bottom lip.

"Sure thing. We'd like to create a summer program where students coming back to the area could get a job at the ranch. They'd have to apply and their grades would be a factor. We

can work all that out. We're always looking for seasonal workers, and in turn, this would give the students an income and experience. And it doesn't only have to be ranch jobs. There could be one or two potential office positions if a student wants business and administration experience."

"Jett, this is... I can't believe this." She beams. "I can't thank you enough. I don't want to sound ungrateful or confused, but can I ask why?"

"Why?" He sounds taken aback. "What kind of question is that? Why not?"

"No, don't get me wrong. It's a great program and we need business sponsors. I just... Canyon Spring doesn't need this program, so why are you willing to support it?"

"Hey, I'm going to be blunt here. We're a business and we get a tax break on donations and some sponsorships. Frankly, helping the community is great for our reputation. We've always said we want to give back, and this is putting our money where our mouths are. As for what we get out of it..." He trails off, and despite not being in the room, I'm guessing that he loves keeping up the suspense, and Wren's hanging on his every word.

I'd been wrong about Jett Kincaide and yes, jealousy did cloud my judgement. He's a decent guy and truly cares for Wren. He's a good friend.

"Yes. Go on." She's a little more impatient, not quite sure if all is well.

He chuckles. "We believe this will be big and local politicians are going to be all over this. We want top billing as lead sponsor, and of course our donation will reflect that."

"And that's it?" Her fingers twitch in my grip.

"Yeah, but—"

"No, I get it. You want visibility. It'll bolster your reputation and community presence, I understand. It's just that..." She presses her lips together and I figure she's collecting her thoughts. And now the roles are reversed. Jett waits patiently for Wren to continue. "This is almost too easy.

Too good to be true. There are any number of local programs you could support. Why this one? And especially now with all the negative stuff swirling around it?”

Jett clears his throat. “Wren, I know you. Respect and trust you. That kind of thing is priceless. Without a doubt, I know you’ll do the very best for those kids and for the community, and sadly, my brothers and sisters and I...we can’t say the same for some of the other programs. This is a good thing. I promise we don’t have an ulterior motive. You’ll get a call tomorrow from our lawyer to arrange a meeting. I may or may not be there. This part, all the behind the scenes stuff, isn’t my kind of thing. I’m good up front.” He laughs again and I join in.

She looks stunned, eyes glassy and far-off, and I use this opportunity to jump in. “Thanks a lot, Jett. Wren’s a little overwhelmed right now, in a good way.”

“Oh my God, yes. Thank you, Jett. So much.”

“All right, you two have a good night.”

She stares at me for what feels like the longest beat in history and then launches herself at me. I hold her tight, only loosening my grip when she starts to pull back.

“Oliver, this is amazing. Thank you. While I don’t know how much they’re willing to donate, this could take care of most, if not all, the first year tuition.” She claps her hands together. “And this is a great way to drown out some of the rumors. Canyon Spring’s support will help encourage other businesses to back the program.”

“I couldn’t agree more. This is definitely good news, and I figure we could use some of that about now.”

She swings her arms around me once more, and the nearness of her is enough to calm any of the lingering turmoil within. “Thank you. I had considered calling Jett, but with how everyone was treating me...” She breaks the hug and looks up at me, a slight blush coloring her cheeks. “I was afraid. I didn’t want to hear it from someone I considered a friend, you know?”

I nod. “I get it. But Jett could never think less of you. He’s proud to call you a friend, and I believe they truly want to help the kids.”

Nodding, she runs her fingers along the back of my hand, tentative. “Me too. This is good for the program. I don’t want to sound like Debbie Downer, but there’s still the whole paternity thing.”

The quiver in her voice, more a hesitation than anything else, nearly breaks me. The baby is still a big issue for her. It isn’t the same for me. I don’t need a test to prove anything. Dot can scream it from the rooftops, and shit, the entire town can think I’m no better than my father. It doesn’t matter to me. Only one thing does.

My heart bashes wildly against my rib cage as if wishing to leap out of me and into her hands—to show Wren I’m all hers.

“Yeah, about that. Kendall says we need to file a court order for DNA paternity testing.”

“You’d do that?” There’s a slight upbeat lilt to her tone, almost surprised, and it rocks me to think she still has doubts. Surely, she shouldn’t, not if I’m willing to go to these lengths to prove to her and others that I’m not the father? “I’d do anything for you. For all of this to go away. For you to believe me. I only want to be with you.”

“I do believe you.” She slides closer and takes my hand. “I’m sorry if I made you think I didn’t. I just don’t know how we can prove she’s lying.”

“It’s hard to have to wait, but in the end, the truth will come out. Wren, I’m so sorry this is happening. And I hate to have to say this, but Kendall thinks it would be best for us to keep our relationship on the down low for now. Or even...”

I don’t want to say it. When my lawyer spelled out a strategy to combat all things concerning Dot, what I’m about to say was what I disliked the most. I fought her for another option, yet she couldn’t see any.

“What is it?”

“If we hit pause. She thinks it might help with getting Dot to back off. We play to her ego a bit and let her think she’s won. That we aren’t together.”

“What are you saying? We hide our relationship or break up?”

“No. Well, sort of.” I rub my suddenly clammy hands down my jeans-clad thighs. “We go back to seeing each other in secret. This way people will think we’ve broken up. But just so I’m clear.” I tighten my grip on her. “We’re not breaking up.”

Her lips mash together and she frowns. “No. It would just be another lie. I understand why Kendall thinks it’s a good play and it may even work, but I’m not sneaking around. It felt like we were a dirty little secret, and now, with what Dot’s saying about us, it feels like it’s true. This is getting to be too much.”

She gets off the couch, and the dog follows her to the window overlooking the backyard. “I love you and want to be with you, but Dot shouldn’t even get a second to think she has won. I hate that this sounds like a damn game or competition. This is our lives.”

“Wren—” I struggle with the right thing to say.

She cuts me off. “Don’t get me wrong; sometimes sacrifice is necessary, and we’ve made difficult decisions. There’s a lot at stake and we’ve both paid a huge price. But our love deserves to be out in the open and should be. I can’t do this the way you want.”

The way *I* want? I don’t want any of this.

All I want is us.

Her anguish and resolution are enough to bring me to my knees in pure reverence. As much as it pains me to think she might break things off—God, I hope not—I’m not going to give her a chance.

Now more than ever, I see things clearly.

She shakes and I leap to my feet, rushing to her side. Tears fall silently down her cheeks and I cup them both, pressing my forehead to hers. “I’m in utter admiration of you for being true to yourself, and I couldn’t agree with you more. We will do things our way. No hiding.”

My lips lightly touch hers and I hold my breath, worried she might pull away, reject what I have to say before I get it out. “Wren, I won’t lose you, not when I finally have all of you. When we were kids, best friends, I always believed in forever with you and knew in my bones there was more to come for us. I always wanted more, but I was too young and not ready for what that meant. Then when I was ready... our timing was off.”

I release an irritated huff and chuckle, shaking off any regrets or missteps. We got here even if we had long and hard detours. She’s nodding and smiling like she knows exactly what I mean, like she felt it too.

The sweetest sensation unfurls in my chest. There’s something lighter, freer about her too, and this feeds my soul, inspires me to keep going. “I don’t care how many obstacles are put in our way; I’m not walking away from us. Not from you. Not ever.”

Chapter 27

Wren

The sun shines bright the next day, denying the unrelenting storm Oliver and I will face now that we've decided not to hide. We will face Dot and her lies head-on. We don't have any more to lose, and I'm sick and tired of Dot getting away with her monstrous behavior.

We are out in the open for all the town to see, having breakfast at the Grill. Oliver places his empty coffee cup on the table and stands. "I'll call you or come by the library when I'm done."

His lawyer is meeting with him this morning to proceed with the paternity test and full ownership of the Nest.

Palms pressing on the table, he leans in and lowers his head to mine, lightly kissing me on the mouth.

While some patrons stare or downright gawk like they're at the drive-in and we are the movie, no one has said anything or given us nasty looks. I suppose, after all, this is my family restaurant. If you choose to eat here, you've chosen to support me, if only to get in on the entertainment. So what? Let them stare.

His head dips farther to plant his warm lips on my neck before pulling away, and I shiver at the delicious touch of his mouth on me.

"Bye." My fingers brush his as he straightens.

Oliver passes Coach as he ambles into the restaurant, and the two stop to chat. I'm not close enough to hear what's said,

but from the looks of things, the brief conversation is lighthearted. Both laugh and Coach backslaps Oliver as he saunters outside.

Coach then makes eye contact with me and walks toward the table. At the same time, Pop strides from across the restaurant to refill my coffee cup.

“Hey, Luke. Wren. How are you?” Coach Bell’s smile doesn’t quite meet his eyes.

Something weighty and somber passes between my father and his good friend.

I don’t need to be a genius to figure out they’ve clearly talked about the mess with Dot and maybe even the rejection of Bright Horizons and my potential job loss.

“Hi, Coach. I’m good. Why don’t you have a seat?” I pat the tabletop.

“Why thank you, I’d love to.” He looks to Pop and points at the carafe. “And I’d love some of that too.”

“Sure thing.” Pop nabs a clean cup from a nearby table and pours the dark, hot liquid in.

“So what’s new with you?” He brings the cup to his mouth, eyes drifting to Pop.

I sit back, content to let them gab while I enjoy my coffee, when Lara Crandall whooshes into the Grill like a wintry gust of wind. The sight of her reminds me of today’s top priority—talk to the family sponsors. This includes Lara.

In a split second, she surveys the restaurant, eyes sharply fixing on me, and I realize this tiny slice of solace is about to end. Lara heads this way. She came in looking for me.

“Luke, Coach Bell, good morning.” Lara unravels her wool wrap while both men say hello. Then she looks down at me, and I can’t help but feel like I’m five years old and about to get into trouble. “Wren, just the person I’m looking...” She stops midsentence and turns away from the table. She nabs Percy’s arm as she walks by, practically yanking her to a stop. “I’d like a coffee to go.”

Eyes sparking with ire, my sister suddenly resembles a fire breathing dragon. As she opens her mouth, I inwardly cringe and tense, fully prepared for what is likely to be a less than nice response.

Luckily, we're spared an altercation between the women when my father clears his throat and gives his youngest daughter a loaded "don't you dare, she's a customer" look.

Pop isn't a fan of Lara Crandall, but he runs a business, and there's no room for personal grievances and quarrels at the Grill.

Percy's lips thin yet she nods and plasters on a brittle smile. She probably doesn't trust herself to say anything. Then she rushes off, and Lara's hawkish gaze lands back on me.

"I've heard about all the terrible business with you and..." Lips pursed, she casts a shifty glance at my father then Coach. "Well, I'm not going to get into it. But no surprise, as it should be, your program has been rejected. Now, I've heard some rumblings of you still trying to breathe some life into this idea of yours, and I'm here to tell you that we want nothing to do with it."

I choose to ignore her deliberate positioning and focus on what matters. The kids.

"Uh, what exactly does that mean?"

"We will not be sponsoring Jack. I want nothing to do with you and your program."

My ears ring, hands suddenly tingling, and I start to lose all feeling in my limbs. It's hard to focus on the conversation. Not with her explosive words.

"Well now, Lara, don't you think that's a bit hasty?" Coach wraps his beefy hands around his mug.

Pop deposits the carafe on the table with a little too much force, and the do-good Mrs. Crandall jumps.

His stern stare never wavers from the woman. "Look, I don't disagree. All this business has gotten out of hand and it certainly isn't pleasant, but you seem to forget what this is

about. Not Wren.” He casts a nonchalant hand in my direction as if to suggest that Lara should forget about me.

In different circumstances, I might be upset about this, especially since he’s my father, but he wants her to focus on what matters. Jack, Brayden, and Courtney. And if I know Pop at all, he’ll also boost her ego while he’s at it.

“Think of the children. Think of Jack. He’s a good kid. Bright with a promising future, and you, Lara, have a good heart.” Pop rests his hand on the center of his chest, emphasizing his point. “You’d be helping him make his dreams come true.”

“Well, I...” She flushes, losing a bit of her bluster although this doesn’t last long. As soon as her gaze falls to the table, it snags on me.

Lara straightens her spine and crosses her arms over her chest. “No. This is more than that. We have values. Family is of the utmost importance, and we won’t have anything to do with this...this scandal. It’s simply horrible.”

She turns away from me and shakes her hands like what I’m accused of—carrying on an affair with a taken man—is contagious and she might just catch it.

Insulted doesn’t begin to cover how I feel. My skin prickles with shame, burning and bright, and my heart shrinks at how easily she was driven to punish Jack for something he has nothing to do with.

I have to get through to her. “Lara—”

Pop cuts me off with a penetrating glare. I bite down on the inside of my cheek to stop myself from saying another word. Percy approaches the table with a to-go cup.

As if reading my mind, my father says something similar to what I was going to say. “Jack has nothing to do with this. If you could just put aside—”

“No.” Lara chops her hand in the air, both literally and proverbially ending Pop’s argument. “And I’m sure the other families will agree with me once they have all the facts.”

Calm abandons me. Not only is she pulling the rug out from under Jack, but she's also determined to do the same to Courtney and Brayden.

"Facts?" My sarcastic tone cuts the suffocating tension, and I get to my feet. "Those aren't facts. They're rumors at best but more like out-and-out lies. Mrs. Crandall, if I could only talk with you and Jed—"

While I'm not close to Jed Crandall, her husband is more reasonable. I doubt he's even aware of her cruel decision, all so she can throw herself into the middle of this—what did she call it—scandal. The man doesn't care much for drama and gossip, all of which his wife thrives on.

"No. My decision is final."

A pang of fury flares deep within me, merging with my mounting sense of absolute hopelessness. On the verge of tears, I briefly squeeze my eyes shut at the familiar sting tickling my nose.

"Mrs. Crandall, I think it's time you leave." Percy thrusts a to-go cup of coffee at the woman.

Lara slides her wrap on and stomps out the door. I drop my head into my hands and will the tears away. Why does it feel like everything is becoming more difficult with each passing day?

"You okay?" My dad rubs my back, but I'm unable to answer him, afraid it'll explode from me as a sob.

"Someone needs to teach that woman a lesson." My sister wraps an arm around my waist.

"What do family sponsors do?" Coach asks, and before I can answer, Percy fills him in.

He peppers us with another question. "Don't you have other families willing to sponsor?"

I scrub my hands down my face and blink away my sorrow. "Yes, or at least, I hope so. But it's one family per child."

Expression grim, he nods. "I see."

“The Millers and Bensons. I was planning on speaking to the families today.”

Never before have I felt like this, but suddenly, I want to call in sick and blow off the library. Not because I don't love my job, but because time is running out. If Lara Crandall gets to the Millers and Bensons before I do, it could all be over.

My eyes burn once more with the realization that Jack ultimately loses and possibly so do Courtney and Brayden. I can't even begin to think about how I'm going to tell Jack. I can't. I have to find a solution.

“I don't know what to do. I could try to get a loan.” I'm thinking out loud, and even as I suggest it, I'm not so sure I'd qualify on my salary and with my mortgage.

But I have to try.

If I lose all three families, I might as well shelve Bright Horizons for the unforeseeable future.

Chapter 28

Oliver

Wren comes home heartbroken, eyes swimming with tears. Fear snatches all the air from my lungs as dread and worry fill my chest.

Arms outstretched, I near her. “What’s wrong?”

Wordlessly, she collapses into my chest and breaks down. Her tears flow fast and freely. Though I soothe and encourage her to let it all out, I try not to lose my ever-loving mind. Wild and awful ideas bombard me. What did Dot do now? Or is this something else?

Eventually, she steps back, angrily swipes at the tears on her cheeks, and tells me the disheartening news about the Crandalls refusing to sponsor Jack. She continues to fill me in on how, between Reggie and Zoe, they covered for her at the library while she tracked down the two remaining family sponsors. Desperate to secure their support and address any of their concerns, she spent hours tracking them down all over town.

As the words spill from her mouth, her worry that Lara would get to them first is palpable. So much so a knot of apprehension balloons in my throat. And only lessens, somewhat, when she mentions that the Millers, Courtney’s sponsor, are still committed and unperturbed by the town’s rejection or Dot’s drama.

Her conversation with the Benson family didn’t go as well. On the plus side, they didn’t completely back away from

supporting Brayden, though they were hesitant to commit, stating they need time.

“Now I wait and hope and pray the Bensons come through.” She crosses her fingers and curls the corners of her lips up in a strained smile.

“Okay, let’s go with best-case scenario first. If the Bensons come through, what are our options to help Jack?” I rub her back and lead her into the kitchen.

“I was thinking I could take out a loan.” She glances at the set table, then me. “You made dinner?”

“Ah, no. I love you, but wouldn’t do that to you. Grilled cheese is about as good as my cooking gets. I picked up Chinese on the way home.” I smile sheepishly and open the oven to take out the warming food.

She laughs, and it’s the first time since coming home that her smile is genuine. “Thank you. I’m not really hungry, but I’ll sit with you.”

“You’ve got to eat. I got spring rolls and wonton soup. Why don’t you start with that?”

Relenting, she nods and helps bring the dishes to the table. We tuck into our chairs and she drops a roll on her plate. “I’m going to the bank tomorrow to see if I can get a loan.”

I finish swallowing the hot soup and put down the spoon. “For Jack?”

“Yes. It’s the only thing I can think of. When I put this program together, I spoke to a lot of families in town and the surrounding area. While I had a good amount of interest, most didn’t want to commit.” She plays with the soup, swirling the spoon through the broth. “I stopped looking after I found those three families. Now, with all of this going on, it was stupid of me—”

“Hey, you’re not stupid and you didn’t know this was going to happen. I would’ve done the same thing. You only needed three families. Can we start talking to families again?”

“Yes, but it takes time, and now with the news about the program and me out there and making the rounds around town...” She averts her gaze, cheeks reddening. “I’m not so sure people will even talk to me. I can’t leave Jack’s future up to chance. I need a backup, and even at that, I don’t hold out much hope of the bank approving me. My salary’s a joke, and after I pay my mortgage and bills...”

She trails off and shoves a spoonful of soup in her mouth. I doubt it’s out of hunger and more an excuse to stop talking.

“What if we applied together for the loan? Our chances have to be better together than separate.”

On my own, I didn’t look so great on paper either. The bank would likely frown upon my financial situation. I don’t have a home and soon I’ll be embroiled in a court battle for ownership of my business. But together I believe we stand a chance.

“Oliver, I can’t ask you to take on debt even if it’s only on paper because I wouldn’t expect you to pay any of it back.”

“First of all, you didn’t ask. I want to. And second, Wren, I’m with you all the way. I will help you pay it back.”

“Ol—”

To stop another word of protest from falling from her mouth, I explode from my seat and cover her mouth with mine. My hands grab on to her waist and I hoist her onto my lap as I sit back down.

One of her hands clutches my shoulder, and the fingers of her other hand thread my hair at the back of my neck. Instead of attempting to break away, she kisses me to the ends of the earth.

She may be forlorn thanks to the latest blow to the program, but I’m relieved to see she wants me. Her eagerness to slide her tongue into my mouth, dueling with mine, reaffirms that we’re in this together.

The vibration of my phone, skittering across the table, causes our lips to pull apart. Wren has a better angle to see the screen and gasps before hopping off my lap.

“It’s a text from Kellen.” Her hands shake as she seizes it from the table and thrusts the phone at me. “What does it say?”

She’s aware that I tried to find him, talk to him, only to learn that he’d left town. Anticipation pulses through me as I glance down at his text.

Kellen: we need to talk.

I read it out loud and she jumps up and down, excitedly. “Can you call him? Or tell him to come over here.”

I type out a reply, inviting him to Wren’s, and he responds right away. “He’s on his way.”

No longer hungry, we clean the kitchen, put the food away, and only have to wait a few minutes before the doorbell rings. Gretzky barks and follows me to the door.

I hold the dog back and let Kellen in. It’s strange to think that at one time, I spent the majority of every day with Kellen, and now, we’re practically strangers.

We haven’t really talked since high school. I ended the friendship, done with his antics and how he was always stirring up trouble. We wanted different things out of life.

While I was growing up, eager to take on responsibility and make a life, Kellen was... I don’t know. He seemed stuck or content to go nowhere fast.

“I heard you were looking for me.” He swaggers into the house, cocky as ever, and bends to pet the dog.

“Yeah. Come in.” I lead us into the living room.

“Hey, Kellen.” Wren gives him a halfhearted wave from where she’s perched on the arm of a chair.

He isn’t her favorite person. Not only because of his interference in our lives. No, Kellen has also caused problems for Zoe in the past, among other people.

“Hi Wren.” His voice sounds like a velvety rumble, the very one he always said the women loved.

He stands there, stance wide, chest puffed out as he admires her from head to toe. Anger charges through me like a bull at how blatant he is. Surprisingly, what bubbles to the surface is my recent fury at learning how he lied to her back in grade school about me. And why? Because he wanted her for himself.

His lie set Wren and me on divergent paths—Wren thinking I liked Dot, of all people, and oh, how the irony isn't lost on me. I want to punch him. Instead, I settle for marching over to the chair and bringing Wren into my lap.

I'm a fucking caveman. I should care but can't seem to curb the Neanderthal in me. Without words, I'm making sure he gets the message loud and clear.

Stay away from Wren.

We are together, and if he dares try to make a move, he'll have to go through me first.

She lightly hits me on the shoulder, face a pretty pink, and her look reminds me that she doesn't need my interference. Wren can take care of herself, and most importantly, she doesn't want or even like Kellen. I've got nothing to worry about.

I whisper, "Sorry," at the same time Kellen chuckles and points his finger between the two of us.

"I heard that you two are finally together. About fucking time. I always knew you were meant for each other."

"Then why the fuck did you try to get in the way?" My question is razor-sharp and designed to cut, and Wren instantly tightens her hooked arm around my neck.

I loosen my jaw and sheepishly nod, conveying I'm done and sorry for my churlish behavior.

"Hey, boys, let's not rehash the past." Her warm but pointed gaze does the trick, and my racing blood starts to slow and cool. Then she turns to Kellen. "You know that I saw you and Dot in the alley a while back. What was that about?"

He stares at me, suddenly looking a lot less sure of himself. “Uh, Oliver... You and Dot have been done for a while, right?”

“Yeah. For years.”

“Phew.” He mocks wiping his brow, and I’m losing patience but clamp my jaw shut because if I speak, he can’t. “Yeah, well, we’ve kind of been fucking for a while now.”

“Kinda?” Wren and I say at the same time and I add, “Which is it? You are or you aren’t?”

“We used to. Not anymore. We haven’t been together in about a month.”

Wren sits up in my lap, more alert than before, and I feed off her hopeful energy. Is she thinking what I’m thinking? Was her hunch right? Oh, God, I fucking hope so.

“Okay. I don’t care, man.” I lean forward. “So, in the alley, what was that? A lover’s spat? Did you break up or what?”

“I got her pregnant. The baby’s mine.”

“I knew it.” Wren springs to her feet and does a little dance but quickly checks herself. “Uh, sorry.” Her expression clouds, eyes finding Kellen. “Why is she lying?”

We’ve talked about this before and can both guess why, but we wait for Kellen to confirm it.

“Apparently, I’m good enough to fuck but not be seen with or to be a father.” Tone scathing, he scowls and grinds his teeth together.

“So in the alley...” I tug Wren to my side and wrap a hand around the back of her thigh. “She was telling you to go along with her lie?”

“Something like that. She wants me to shut up. And she wants to shut me out.” He suddenly stands and there’s a nervous energy about him. Kellen paces. “I’ve done no good in my life.”

He scratches his chin and scowls at something in the distance, most probably recounting some of his biggest

fuckups. Like lying to me, not just about Wren but countless other times. Like the time he set up Mad to take the fall for something he did in high school, and probably the worst of all, running his younger brother, Arlo, out of town. And those are just the things I know about. Who knows what else he's done.

“But this is my kid. This is my chance to do something right. I want a fucking chance. I'm not looking to be with Dot. We'd kill each other, and she's made it perfectly clear what she thinks of me. But no matter what she says or does, I'm the goddamn father.” He stabs a finger at me. “Not you.”

“Hey, I know.” I hold my hands up as if surrendering, but I've no wish to fight over this. “I've got nothing to do with this. Dot's the one lying and dragging me into it. Are you willing to go on the record with that? Get a DNA paternity test so we can disprove anything Dot tries to come up with?”

“Hell yeah. She ain't getting away with this.”

Wren and I share a look. Her face brightens, though I can see she's trying to rein in her jubilation in the midst of Kellen's plight.

At long last, we've got Dot right where we want her.

It's over.

Chapter 29

Wren

“I can’t believe how much has changed from yesterday.” I start down the stairs to the ground floor of the library with one hand on the railing and the other holding my phone to my ear. “It’s like a whole new world.”

A giddy, childlike laughter escapes my chest and I don’t try to contain it. I can barely believe how our luck has changed.

Oliver’s deep, hearty laughter hits me through the phone line like what I imagine freedom might sound like, rich and expansive. “I know. It’s crazy and about damn time.”

“So tell me, what did your lawyer say?”

After Kellen left last night, we wanted to run through the streets of Winslow Grove shouting the truth for all to hear. We could hardly sleep knowing Dot’s reign of terror was coming to an end.

Oliver sent a late-night email to Kendall insisting on a meeting first thing this morning. Unfortunately, she was going to be in court in Helena, but she made room for him in her schedule this afternoon.

His voice jerks me back to our conversation. “She’s confident that we have a strong defamation of character lawsuit. She even thinks we should give Dot a heads-up before we file—”

Confusion swims through my thoughts. “But why would we tell Dot what we’re doing? Won’t that give her more time

to fight back?”

“You’d think. Kendall believes that when Dot hears what we have, that Kellen is willing to testify and she’ll have to consent to a paternity DNA test, there’s no way she’ll want to go to court.” He pauses and I’m on edge, breathless in anticipation of hearing more.

Why isn’t he saying anything? Did someone come into the shop? Or did the line drop?

“Oliver?”

“Yeah, I’m here. Tyler.” He lowers his voice in that way he does when it’s only the two of us. “We have a winning case. Kendall doesn’t like to guarantee anything, but when I told her everything, she said this is a slam dunk. We have Dot.”

“Oh my gosh.”

“Yeah. Kendall thinks she’ll cave and agree to our terms. She’ll want to make it all go away.”

“What are the terms?”

“This is the best part.” His smile shines bright in his tone, and I wish he was in front of me so I could see it. “Dot will sign over her interest in the Nest. I get the business, one hundred percent. No strings. No money. And there’s a noncompete clause. She can’t open a business or work in a business of any kind that deals with custom furniture, design, anything.”

“Wait. What? Can you do that? She doesn’t get anything?”

“Nope. Again, she reminded me that Dot’s parents lent me the money. I paid them back with interest. The payments were made with revenue from the Nest. Neither Dot nor I paid from our own pocket, which is as it should be. She really hasn’t put anything into the business. Sure, she worked there, but she got a salary. So what she gets out of this is not being taken to court, charged with defamation, and likely having to pay a fine.”

“Oliver, this is amazing. I hope she goes for it.”

“Yeah. She’d be a fool not to.”

My teeth sink into my bottom lip, squashing any doubt that Dot would be reckless enough to fight this. Why would she? She doesn't stand a chance.

“And when will she find out about the defamation suit?”

“She should get notice tomorrow.”

“Wow.”

“Hey, Wren, I gotta go. There's a call coming in. I'll see you later. Love you.”

“You bet. Love you too. Bye.”

This news lightens my steps to the front desk. I've come to terms with the fact that there isn't much I can do about the city council's rejection of Bright Horizons. All I can hope for is that once everything is out in the open, the mayor's threat about firing me goes away.

As for the program, I doubt the truth about Dot will have much of an impact on the town's decision and I no longer care.

While there's still the question of sponsoring Jack—Oliver and I made an appointment with the bank for tomorrow to talk about a loan—Kellen's news last night was a game changer.

Once Dot's lies are revealed, with the backing of Canyon Spring Ranch, I'm sure I can get more businesses to donate and maybe even sponsor other aspects of the program. It'll be a longer and maybe bumpier road, but the more I sit with the new reality, I'm coming around to not needing the mayor and his cronies. They say everything happens for a reason, and maybe this way is better.

“Hello, Wren.” Coach strolls into the library with a newspaper tucked under his arm.

“Hi, Coach, how are you?” I don't see him in here often.

“I'm good. Just good.” He looks around the library as if seeing it for the first time. “It's fairly busy tonight.”

“So-so.” I shrug and don't bother to tell him that we usually have a few more people in here on this day of the

week. Since the mess with Dot, the numbers have dwindled. “What can I do for you?”

He twists his football ring. “Uh, I think I can do something for you.”

“How so?”

“Well, that thing with Lara and Jack...”

Despite being more hopeful about Bright Horizons’ prospects, recalling the conversation and how that woman callously pulled out causes beads of sweat to gather at the back of my neck.

“Yeah, Coach, I don’t want to talk about that again.”

“No. No. Me neither. But you see, it got me thinking. Evie and me... As you know, well, we never did have kids. We wanted them and boy, did we try, but it was never meant to be.”

He taps his fingers on the table and scans the library. Maybe looking to see if anyone’s listening? I’m not sure, but he does seem anxious or nervous.

“I know. I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you, but I can’t say that I regret it. I miss my Evie every day, and there’s no one else out there for me. I wouldn’t have had it any other way. But you see...while I didn’t have kids, maybe there is something I can do after all. Kinda have a kid in a different way. Help where I can.”

I cock my head to one side, not quite following him. “What do you mean?”

“I see what Reggie and you are doing for those foster kids, and I’ve got no kids or grandkids to pass on what I have. I’ve got savings, you see. Sure, I’m going to need most of it, but there’s extra. I don’t see why I can’t help.”

“Help?”

“Yeah. I would like to take the Crandalls’ place.”

“Pardon? What are you saying? Do you mean, you’d like to sponsor Jack while he goes to college?”

“Yes. Yes.” He beams.

“Wow, Coach, this is really generous of you. But you don’t know exactly what’s involved. Why don’t I—”

He holds up a hand to stop me. “I know what’s involved. Luke gave me your draft proposal. I read it front to back.” He speaks with such certainty that I can’t help but let my hopes float a little higher.

I remember talking Pop and Percy through several versions of the program when I was drafting it. They could most probably recite the entire thing from the hours they let me talk things through with them. Funny, Pop never told me Coach asked him about it.

“I want to do this, and look, I know this would be a sponsorship. Jack isn’t coming to live with me or nothing.” He chuckles and my heart breaks just a little.

Oh, how he’d love for Jack to live with him. He’d never say it, but it’s plain to see he’s lonely. He’s coached Jack for all of high school, and they have a good relationship. I can’t think of a better fit.

“Coach, I don’t know what to say.” I rush out from behind the counter, eager to give him a hug, but stop short of doing so. He isn’t a touchy-feely kind of person. “Thank you doesn’t feel like enough. This...this makes up for all the other horrible things that have happened. You’re like the Wizard of Oz of fixing things.” I squeeze his hand.

“Wasn’t that guy a fraud?” His brows draw together.

“All right, maybe not a great comparison, but you know what I mean.”

He chuckles. “Maybe the lesson here is that you didn’t need the city council. You did this on your own.”

“That isn’t quite true, but kind of you to say, nonetheless. I couldn’t have done this without the help of people like you. You know, it takes a village and all that.”

“It sure does.” He pats my hand. “Okay, so what do you need from me?”

“Right now, nothing. I’ll come by tomorrow with the paperwork to get things started. You should have a lawyer look over the documents before you sign, and if you have any questions, you know where to find me. Night or day, I’ll answer anything.”

“All right then. You have a good evening, Wren.”

He starts for the door and something comes to my mind. “Uh, Coach, do you want to tell Jack?”

I’d love nothing more than to tell Jack the great news. He was crushed, though he hid it well, when I told him about the Crandalls no longer being involved with the program. The only way I’m able to keep my tears from falling is by taking deep breaths and digging my fingernails into my palms.

Coach deserves this opportunity, to witness just how much of a difference he’s making in that boy’s life.

“Oh, yeah. I—I’d really like that. When can I tell him?”

“I’d say you should do it as soon as possible.” I wink and he chuckles, waving goodbye.

A few hours later, I do a final walk through the library before closing up. Once outside, key in the lock, my phone chimes. I grab it from my coat pocket, turn toward my car, and read the text.

Oliver: Meet me at Winslow Grove High. You know where.

A wild rush of excitement zings through me like an electric current. He wants me to meet him in the gym.

My fingers hover over the screen, so many questions crowding my mind, even if I’m loving the intrigue and surprise of it all. What is he up to?

I must take too long to respond because another text pops up.

Oliver: Wren? Let me know you got this. That you’re coming.

Laughing, I open my car door, slide inside, and start the engine. As if that was ever even a question. I quickly type out a reply.

Me: I'm on my way.

As I walk from my car, parked in the high school lot, to the building, I'm overcome with memories of that night, not too long ago. When we found our way back to each other. To our friendship, the wonderfully magical childhood we shared, and to this next chapter of our lives together. Our future.

The night we were stuck in the gym.

Who knew what started out as a potentially disastrous night would end in such promise? Finally.

Even with all that Dot has put us through—and there still might be more to come—I wouldn't have it any other way. So long as I'm with Oliver, I'd walk through fire for him.

When I get to the gym this time, the doors are closed and not an orange pylon is in sight. I pull on the handle, and without seeing him, I know Oliver is here.

“This is all very mysterious, Twist.” All the air leaves me. My feet falter and I stop abruptly when I catch sight of him.

Oliver in navy gym shorts, showcasing his sculpted golden legs, a snug white T-shirt hugging his defined biceps and gloriously solid chest. A basketball rests at about mid thigh with his hand holding it in place.

He could be on the cover of *Men's Health*.

He should be. Damn.

I quickly wipe at my chin. *Okay, I exaggerate.* This man always makes me feel like I'm drooling. He bounces the ball in front of him, all casual and sexy like this is what we do every day.

“Hey, Tyler.” And that smile.

His dimples pop and my insides somersault.

“Hey, Twist.” On shaky legs, I slowly near him. “What is all this?”

“How about a game of horse?”

Déjà vu is a thing. Without warning, I still, and this moment freezes for the blink of an eye. My riotous emotions bowl me over with the very same exhilaration and temptation from that fateful night. So much has changed since then, and yet my feelings for him... they're the same. Everything. They course through me like wild and magnificent waves crashing upon a shore.

No. That's not true. How could they be the same?

My feelings for him are boundless and all-consuming and a million times more than they were that night. They keep growing and deepening.

Now I know what it's like to have Oliver's complete devotion. To have his piercing hazel eyes on me, drinking in every single breath I take like I'm the air, the sunshine, and water that he needs to live.

“Tyler, whattaya say?” He's standing in front of me, hardly an inch between us.

The basketball falls from his side, hitting the gym floor with a loud *thump*, followed by the echoing thumps as it dribbles away from us.

“Uh, sure.”

His hands clasp my waist and he grins. “Nah, I'm joking about horse. I don't want to play ball.”

“What is this?”

“Follow me.” His lips graze the tip of my nose, and my body leans into his with an undeniable need.

My fingers interlace with his, and wordlessly, I traipse behind him to Coach's office. Inside, the desk is transformed into a table for two complete with domed plates, silverware, candles, and wine and beer. There are fluffy blankets and overstuffed pillows dotting the couch.

“Oliver...what...how did you do this?”

“You like?”

“What’s not to like?” I’m nodding and laughing and filled with a burning love and reverence for this man. “Yes.”

“I had help. Mad and Coach let me in, then gave me the keys and the rundown on locking up.”

Mad now spends his days at the high school, shadowing Coach and learning all he can to take over when the man retires at the end of December.

“Oh and that reminds me, Coach told me he talked to you about Jack.” His fingers grip my hips and he hauls my body flush against his. “That’s fucking amazing. Coach sponsoring Jack. Perfect.”

“Isn’t it?” The words come out breathless.

One of his hands moves to my head, fingers sliding deep into my hair, massaging my scalp, and the fingers of his other dig into my hip. His lips are on mine, and as effortlessly and gratifying as breathing, we kiss.

Unsurprisingly, our kiss becomes a mini make-out session. Every kiss deeper and longer than the one before. Everything around us ceases to exist.

I don’t know how long we kiss for. It could be a minute, it could be days. Eventually, he grudgingly pulls away on a mournful groan. His face tips forward until his forehead presses against mine.

His hands tenderly cup my face. “Hold that thought. There will be more of that later. I promise.”

Hands move swiftly from my cheeks to my waist, and he spins me around to face the desk. A surge of sadness and loss invade me. Even though he’s still close, I want to rewind to seconds before when our mouths were fused and hit pause.

But there’s no time to dwell on that when he grins at me like some kind of naughty Santa—ready to shower me with gifts—and pulls out a chair for me. I nip my bereft moan in the bud and park my desire.

Later. He promised.

He drags another chair next to mine. “And Percy helped with dinner.” He whips off the silver domes to reveal juicy burgers and fries from the Grill. My favorite.

“I’ve also got a chocolate milkshake for you in the cooler.” He points to a small one in the corner. “I wasn’t sure if you’d want that or wine.”

“Wow.” Still dazed and not fully understanding, I tip my head to one side and gaze at the spread before me. “What is all this?”

“Dinner.”

“Here?”

“I couldn’t think of a better place. Well, there is the treehouse.” He winks and hands me a napkin, then picks up a fry. “I know our memories in that makeshift wooden house are countless. All good, happy, and special, but the gym... It’s our beginning...”

He needn’t say more. Before I can tell him so, his expression morphs from playful to something more serious. “I can’t recreate that night, and truthfully, I wasn’t trying to. It was fucking fantastic as it was. But I wanted to celebrate and figured this was the best place for that.”

“You’re right. It’s perfect.” With a quick peck to his full lips, I pick up my burger with both hands then pause with it on its way to my mouth. “Wait. Does this mean we’re also sleeping here? And before you think I’m not down for it, it would be kind of fun—”

“No. We’re going home. Eventually. After dinner...” He drops the fry and wipes his fingers on the napkin. “I’ve got a few other things in mind.”

His hand sweeps over the couch with the blankets and pillows. It looks like a warm, soft cloud that I want to dive into, and suddenly I’m overcome with hot embarrassment.

“Oh, God, please tell me you set that up after Coach, Mad, and Percy left?”

He chuckles and takes my hand. “Of course I did. We’re going to have a little fun. Create some new memories with one distinct difference.”

Oliver lifts my hand to his mouth and lightly brushes his warm, full lips along my knuckles.

Every single graze is a spark lighting my spine. I shiver in delight. “What?”

“This time...the lights stay on.”

Chapter 30

Wren

Over the following days, my friends and family work tirelessly to pull everything together for today's occasion. Forced to abandon public recognition or funding, Oliver and I devised a plan to make the program happen no matter what.

Armed with the truth and backing of all of those who truly matter, and of course, Oliver's steadfast encouragement, I am officially launching the Bright Horizons program.

I place the flowers on the final table and pause to glance around the town hall. "This feels premature," I say to no one in particular.

"Shush, you." Reggie playfully swats my hand then goes back to setting up the poster with the QR code with all the information about the program.

We have several posters around the room with all the details. Pop and Percy set out the food on the long table running at the back of the room. If nothing else, people will show up for that. And Zoe walks over, stopping to take a few more candid shots of those working around the room. As promised, she's captured all the setup and will take photos throughout the event.

"Why do you say that?" Oliver runs a firm hand down my arm.

"I don't know."

Truth be told, it isn't that I don't believe in the program but more the public spectacle of it all. This launch party will do double duty, and this isn't really our thing. Neither Oliver nor I like to air our business in public. But Dot dragged our names through the proverbial mud and then some. This is our way of setting the record straight in one fell swoop.

"It'll be all good and you'll do great." His lips gently press against my neck. "And remember, I'm right beside you. Through it all."

I twirl around to face him and lace my fingers behind his neck. "I love you, and thank you for everything."

I try to infuse all of my love and gratitude into our kiss. Oliver's beaten himself up about all of this mess. He feels responsible for everything that's happened to me, from the rejection of the program to the loss of my job. Yes, I was fired on the same day I met with a few of the Kincaides and their lawyers about the program. It was a hard loss but to be expected, and I will be okay. None of this is Oliver's fault. This was all Dot's doing, and I have to keep reminding myself of this as we get ready to rock her world.

Over the next half hour, people start to trickle in, and when we're only minutes from go time, the silent guest of honor, although she doesn't know it—Dot Malone—and her father, the mayor, and her mother slip into the back of the room.

But they aren't here to be discreet and nosy. No, they want to upstage this gathering even if all they were told, like everyone else in the town, is that this is a launch party for the Bright Horizons program.

Dot holds her head high, stopping for a few hellos and pats on the hand from some in the crowd, as she makes her way to the front of the room. Her father walks stoically by her side as if her bodyguard, her mother in tow. I want to roll my eyes at how she acts—in fact they all do—as if this gathering is for them. Whatever.

I'm prepared for them to pull some kind of stunt but not in the least bit worried.

“You ready?” Oliver squeezes my arm and deliberately steps in front of me to block my view of the Malones.

“As I’ll ever be.”

“You got this.” He kisses me and then I’m walking onto the stage at the front of the room.

“Good morning, everyone.” I pause and wait for the room to settle, all eyes on me. “I want to thank you all for coming today. I’m going to keep this brief as we have a few things to get through.”

I’ve rehearsed my speech so much in the past twenty-four hours that I don’t look at my notes as I cover the high-level purpose of the program and how pleased I am to announce the launch. Then I introduce our sponsors, giving them each two minutes to say something about their involvement and why.

In addition to Canyon Spring Ranch, we were able to secure five more sponsorships and sign on seven more families to sponsor future foster kids coming into the program next year and beyond. As all of this is shared with the community, the Malones seethe, Dot especially.

Her perfectly made-up face gets redder and redder as each minute ticks by and applause for the program grows. It’s as if the community has been swayed to our side or forgotten just why they came here—to likely watch the demise, once more, of the program.

“Before I conclude my remarks, I wanted to thank you above everyone else, Oliver Winslow.” I glance at him and hold out my hand, urging him to join me on stage.

His smile shines bright as he strolls onto the stage. The crowd noise picks up in a growing whisper, all of which we anticipated.

“Without Oliver’s love and support, none of this would have been as enjoyable or frankly, perhaps even possible. I’ve been committed to this program from a young age, like I said earlier, but it’s Oliver’s unwavering belief in me and this program that’s made it bearable for me. He’s helped me withstand all the scrutiny and”—I pause to find the mayor,

eyes locking with his—“rejection and never lose focus on what’s at the very center of this endeavor and most important of all. The foster kids. Thank you, my love.”

I lean over and plant a kiss on his cheek. There are a few *awws* from the crowd, but also as many, if not more, boos. Again, we’d counted on this and it feeds into our plan.

“Finally, if you’d like to show your support for the program, in any way, please see Serena Gold.” I point her out to the crowd at a small desk at the back of the room. “And she’d be happy to chat with you.”

Surprisingly, several people start toward Serena, and while it boosts my joy even further, that combined with Oliver’s presence at my side only triggers Dot. I didn’t know what would do it or when but fully anticipated it. I’m glad she waited until the end.

Dot marches toward the stage, hand on her belly. She wouldn’t want anyone to forget she’s pregnant. With a scathing glare at me, she snatches the microphone out of my hand.

Again, she’s playing into our plan. After all, both Oliver and I wanted Dot to be the one to unleash what she has coming. We’d counted on her to do her part.

“People, don’t be swayed by all of this. Have you forgotten what Wren and Oliver have done to me?”

I inwardly cringe, not loving that she’s tainting what should be a happy occasion. Thankfully, I’ve instructed Zoe not to capture any of this. As much as what’s about to happen is critical and needed, I don’t wish to relive it. Once all is said and done, I want Dot and her lies, and any memory of all of this, buried and behind me.

“About that.” Oliver also has a mic, and this shocks Dot speechless, mouth agape.

“Yes, we’d like to address those rumors.” I also have a mic and Dot doesn’t know it yet, but hers has been disabled.

She won’t be able to drown us out. She may be on the stage, but she’s a captive part of the audience.

I hold up a piece of paper. “We have a DNA test right here that states Oliver isn’t the father.”

Right on cue, Kellen saunters onto the stage. “That’s right. I’m the father. Dot and I were having an affair although we did nothing wrong. There was no cheating involved.” He curbs his devilish smile, clearly reading the room and offering a more repentant tone and demeanor.

For far too long, Kellen has been the town bad boy, but he can’t play that up right now. “As Oliver has stated, he and Dot had broken up nearly two years prior. Dot even told me so. She told me a lot of things...” He lets his innuendo hang in the air, the threat to tell all.

Dot clutches her stomach and grimaces. Guilt and worry pinch at my chest. Is the baby okay? But in the next breath, she forgets all pretenses of distress and lunges for Kellen, yelling obscenities.

Her father gets to her before she can do any damage. I hadn’t noticed Mayor Malone getting onto the stage.

“Dorothy, that’s enough.” He pulls her from doing any harm to Kellen and turns to us. “I’d like to see that test. How do we know it’s real?”

I hand him the paper, and three town doctors walk out onto the stage.

Each of them echo the same sentiment. “I’ve reviewed the document as well as inquired into the legitimacy and stand by the findings. Kellen Marshall is the father.”

As planned, not too long ago, Dot was served with a court order for a DNA paternity test as well as filings for ownership of the Nest by Oliver’s lawyer. She hasn’t responded to the Nest filing, but she did comply with the test. We figured she was buying herself time and thought she still had several weeks before the details of paternity came out. She wasn’t entirely wrong.

The court had their channels for the DNA test, and unfortunately, they move slower than molasses uphill in January. We couldn’t and didn’t want to wait that long, so

Kendall arranged for a private test to also be done and to rush the results.

Normally, we wouldn't share something like this on such a public stage, but the truth had to come out. We didn't want to give Dot any more time to find a way out of this. Also, we figured the truth coming out in town about the baby would force Dot's hand where the Nest was concerned. Just in case she was thinking of fighting Oliver, after the humiliation of this, she wouldn't want a defamation of character charge and whatever disciplinary action would come with it.

"I-I—" Bill Malone looks to me and Oliver, and without warning, the man seems smaller. Face pale, shoulders sagging, he mumbles, "I don't know what to say."

Someone in the crowd shouts, "An apology would be a good start."

I recognize the woman's voice and find Percy at the back, expression fiery and a hand still cupping one side of her mouth as if readying to say more.

The mayor turns to face the crowd, Dot still in his grasp. "Yes, of course. I'm truly sorry about all of this. Had I known, I'd have never backed away from this program or fired Ms. Tyler."

A man in the crowd hollers, "Give her back her job." Then several more people chant the same words.

Oliver curls his arm around my waist and presses his upturned lips against my cheek. A flurry of nerves or excitement or both ruptures inside of me. This is what I'd hoped would happen, and at the same time, I'm not so sure I want to just take the job back without further negotiation.

"Yes, yes." The mayor turns to me. "Ms. Tyler, we would love to have you back."

"We can talk about that later." I lean into Oliver and he asks the mayor pointedly, "And the program?"

"Yes, we need to definitely talk about the program."

I nod, not wanting to commit to anything but willing to hear him out. When this all started, I wanted nothing more than the town's approval. Now that I have private funding and the community seems to want to back Bright Horizons regardless of the town's approval, I'm not so sure I want to give up all control. But it would also be foolish to turn down additional funding.

The mayor nods and looks out into the crowd. "And Dorothy would like to say something."

She sneers at her father, then the crowd. "I've got nothing to say."

He shakes her by his hold, gentle but enough to get his unspoken point across. When he places a microphone in front of her, she reluctantly glances at us, then the crowd.

"Sorry." It's all she says before she turns her back on everyone.

It isn't the apology I'd hoped for. In my daydreams, Dot had been remorseful and I was able to sympathize with her at least partially. But at the very least, I would have a small inkling of understanding as to why she went to such wicked lengths. But I suppose the why is never enough and there's no justification for something like this.

Chapter 31

Oliver

Christmas Eve

“**Y**ou warm enough?” I press my lips to Wren’s hairline, arms wrapping tighter around her, and a low approving hum emanates from where she’s cuddled in my arms.

“I’m perfect.” She tugs the blanket farther up her shoulders.

Scents of wintery pine and fresh snow permeate the air around us as the wind howls. Although we’re protected from the elements, the treehouse isn’t heated, and the frosty wind easily flits through the tiny cracks of the wooden planked walls.

“There’s a little more hot chocolate.” I shake the thermos next to us.

“I’m good.” She shifts to look up at me. “Have you settled on a date for London with MacPherson?”

After the public reveal of the DNA test, as my lawyer predicted, Dot backed off and signed over the Nest. I didn’t know if that was her father’s doing or if she was smart enough to realize we had her.

Literally overnight, the day after the launch of the program, practically the entire town turned their backs on her. Even her parents faced scrutiny and blame for Dot’s actions. Talk about a fall from grace.

She'd once been considered a pillar of the town, along with her entire family. Now the mayor, her father, lived in damage control mode, especially since many people placed the blame for Dot's deceitful ways at her parents' feet.

Since the launch, most haven't seen or heard from Dot. I've spoken with Kellen, and he says the mayor sent Dot to live with his sister in Seattle. He doesn't know what this means for him and seeing the baby, but her father has told him that Dot will not prevent Kellen from being in the baby's life. It seems the mayor's eyes are now fully open to his daughter's ways, and he wants her to get the help she needs. Also, I suspect it doesn't hurt to have Dot out of town. A little distance is always a good thing when he's a public figure.

On the business front, along with getting complete ownership of the Nest, soon after, I received an email from a UK-based high-end furniture company, MacPherson Limited. I'd reached out to them over eighteen months ago when I'd set out to grow the business. They were planning to launch a new line of furniture next year and were looking for a designer. They asked me to bid. I did and successfully won the contract.

It's a big job and will involve some travel, at least to get things set up. But it's great exposure for the Winslow Nest, and my global expansion is well underway.

"Yeah, we're thinking early in the new year. Let me know when you think you can get off and I'll confirm the dates with them."

"Is that your way of asking me to come with you?" She's teasing, knowing full well we've already talked about this.

I plan on having Wren by my side for every trip. "Yup."

One way Mayor Malone tried to pacify the townspeople and maybe right a wrong was to approve Bright Horizons within a week of its launch. At first, Wren wanted to reject his offer, especially considering he wanted to make a big deal out of it with media in attendance for a public announcement.

She no longer needed the town. Her program was thriving with more businesses interested in getting on board. Yet, as

tempting as it was to dish out the same treatment the mayor had once given her, she wouldn't allow the program to miss out on any support because of her pride.

Eventually, they reached a happy medium, where the program remains privately run with the town as another sponsor.

Another concession the mayor made, in addition to giving Wren her job back, was to provide funding for a part-time position at the library. This gave her more flexibility with her other responsibilities and ultimately meant it would be easier for her to agree to come to London with me.

Wren twists to face me, now on her knees and lifting one leg to straddle me. Her mouth grazes mine, soft and sweet, as she sinks against me. I swallow her breathy moan, and all the blood rushes from my head to my groin, leaving me dizzy with want.

Now greedy, my mouth, teeth, and tongue demand more of her, stroking, nipping, and thrusting. And in turn, she doesn't simply kiss me back. Her entire body pushes into me.

I feel her tits pressing softly against my chest, even through our clothes and jackets. Her thighs tighten along the outside of mine and she lowers her body so she can grind herself on my erection.

Just then, we're startled, mouths ripping apart, when Percy shouts from outside, down below, "You two can't hide out here all night. You know Pop's going to come get you sooner or later."

"We'll be out soon." She shifts in my lap. "When's dinner?"

I remembered from my childhood how I loved Christmas Eve at the Tylers. Their annual tradition was an open invitation to anyone and everyone without family or somewhere to be to spend the evening with them. Reggie does her garlic shrimp feast, the kids decorate gingerbread houses, and it's pure chaos. It has been far too long since I've been a part of this magical evening. I can't wait.

“Any minute now,” Percy grunts, not in the least bit satisfied with her sister’s response. “Pop’s in a mood with you two out here, and everyone else is having a grand old time guessing what you two are up to. It’s gotten quite raunchy, and that’s ticking him off too.”

Wren hoots with glee, her cheeks and the tip of her nose rosy from the chill.

“Let me guess, Mad started that.” I tug down the edges of her woolen hat and grin at her.

“Oliver,” Percy drags out my name like it’s a thorn in her side.

She sounds miserable, and while I’d like to help her out, selfishly, I want as much alone time with Wren as I can get.

This is our first Christmas as a couple, and while tomorrow’s the big day and we plan to spend every minute with our friends and family—well, nearly every minute; I’ve got plans that only involve the two of us—I’m not ready to share her with everyone. Not just yet.

“Let them talk,” I holler and Wren snickers again, this time into the crook of my neck. She most likely has taken some pity on her baby sister.

“You guys suck.” Percy makes a point of stomping away, and we stare at each other in the fading twilight.

With the sun going down, it will get even colder out here. “Do you want to go in?” I pull her hips down so she’s sitting on me again.

“Yes and no.” Her mouth presses against mine. “But you know the longer we let Pop stew over us being out here, the more he’s going to make us pay. Like make us do all the dishes for the twenty-five of us. Just the two of us.”

“That’s how I like it.” I shrug and kiss her again.

I peel off my gloves, lean in so our noses are touching, and run my thumbs along her frosty cheekbones. There’s nearly no space between our lips. “I’m going to marry you here.”

Her eyes flare. “In the treehouse?”

“Well, under it or close to it. Or we could do it in the high school gym.”

“Ha.” She rubs her nose along mine. “Well, you need to ask me first.”

“Fine, but that’s just a technicality.”

“Oh, it is, is it?”

“Yeah. You’ve told me many times that I have all of you.”

A slow, brilliant smile tugs at the corners of her mouth, and her eyes sparkle with delight. “That’s true, and can I assume the same is for me with you?”

She’s now removed her gloves too, and her cool fingers traverse the sliver of exposed skin at my neck. A light fluttery sensation skitters through my chest. I’ll never tire of how she excites me with just a look or a touch.

Wren arches a brow, urging me to answer her, and it gives me no end of pleasure to tell her like it is.

“Absolutely, Tyler. You had all of me from the moment I met you.”

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About the Author

USA TODAY bestselling and award winning author, S.M. West writes sexy, angsty stories about brave hearts and wild love, including, more times than not, heart-pumping twists and turns.

Apart from her infinite love of books, she's a self-professed wine, chocolate, and travel junkie. When not writing or hanging with her family, she's usually talking to her characters (in her head) or planning her next adventure.

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