

THE BAYVIEW ROMANCES BOOK 3

EVERY
LITTLE
Thing



LILY SEABROOKE

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Every Little Thing

Bayview Romances Book 3

Lily Seabrooke

*For those who stay
through it all*

*and those of you waiting
for the person
who stays
for you*

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Chapter 1

Harper

Spring in Bayview was beautiful. I was going to miss it once I left this town.

I was a baker. I was probably supposed to love winter—staying inside and baking Christmas cakes and Valentine’s treats and all the sweets to get everyone through the colder months. But frankly, I hated it. The moment I saw those first snowflakes, it was me against the world, and it stayed that way until March rolled around and the blooms poked up, the trees started to get some color again.

And today was my favorite day of the year—the first day above fifty degrees. I had the bakery doors propped open, opened all the windows, and I let the sweet scent of springtime mix with the rich aroma of buttered pastry and bread that filled the bakery as I slotted French breads into their place by the door, filling up the basket as Anders came into the building.

“Oh—almost just walked right into you,” he laughed. “Good morning, Harper.”

“Hey, Anders. How are you and the wife?”

He smiled wider. “Well, you know how it is. Weather’s warming up, so I’m trying to convince her she’s too old to be out planting hollyhocks, and I’ll let you guess just how much luck I’ve had convincing her.”

“She’s a talented gardener. Can’t really keep her away.”

“She’s a silly little duckling and the most stubborn person I’ve ever met, that’s what she is,” he chuckled. “Well, I can’t complain. I’d just been talking about it to Emberlynn yesterday, and she volunteered to help Nancy tend to the garden when she needed it. Said she’d get Aria to help and everything.”

I softened into a smile. “Emberlynn’s a big softie.”

“So she is. Her girlfriend, too, just less likely to admit it. I wonder when they’re going to get married, those two.”

I laughed, turning back to finish slotting the breads into the basket there. “They’ve always been comfy taking their time. I feel like they’re the type to date for eight, nine years before they get married. I bet Gwen and Kay are probably the ones getting married first, even if Will’s going to be jealous. Out of carrot for right now, but there’s chocolate. Always chocolate.”

“Spring’s in the air. Nancy’s not the only one who wants carrot cake now.” He walked alongside me as I headed back in the direction of the register, him heading for the display of mini-cupcakes, his usual—one for his wife every day.

Talk about sickeningly sweet. That was probably something Emberlynn and Aria would do. Probably something I could see Priscilla doing for Annabel sixty years down the line.

Anders said the exact thing I needed him to not follow up with. “Everyone’s been coupling up so fast this past year, you know. You’ll have to find someone too before long.”

“Ugh. I don’t need that. I’m keeping busy running this place. Besides, I…” I pursed my lips. I didn’t need to get into the details with Anders. Poor old man just wanted to get his wife a cupcake. “Relationships are annoying.”

He hummed lightly to himself. “I think Emberlynn used to say things like that.”

I parted ways, heading around to the other side of the register as Krystal corralled her three adorable little daughters up to check out, making small talk with her—the weather, the festival coming up soon—as I bagged up her things and swiped her card. Sam came up after her, grinning at me as he leaned over the counter.

“Hey there,” he said. I glanced down at his empty hands, and back up at him.

“I’m not on the menu,” I said. He laughed—most of what he ever did. He was a big guy, muscular and always

grinning and laughing at everything, like it was impossible to take anything seriously.

“Nah. Nothing like that. Just wanted to ask you some... insider info.”

“How titillating,” I deadpanned.

He whispered—a Sam whisper, the kind that was loud enough everyone in the store could still hear. “What kind of cake does Jenna like?”

I relaxed. “Oh yeah... her birthday’s up soon, isn’t it? I should bring her something. And not one of those creepy clown dolls she likes.”

“Hey, don’t knock the clowns. They grow on you.”

“I’d rather die. She likes a 7-Up cake.”

“Score! I’m buying her one. Do you sell them?”

“You’re in luck. I wouldn’t be trying to sell you on one if I didn’t. On the cake display rack with all the others.”

He grinned, leaning in closer and whispering—still just as loud. “You want to know a secret?”

“Do I ever,” I said, voice flat.

“I forgot it was her birthday. I just wanted to get her a cake.”

“I don’t know why I thought anything different.”

He left for the cakes just as Anders came back up to the counter, smiling after Sam, holding the one mini-cupcake. I already had his order rung up, and he already had the cash in hand for it.

“Sam and Jenna are together, now, too, right?”

“Um... open secret, I think is the current status.”

“Like I said, you’ve got to find your someone too. I’m sure they’d be lucky to have you.”

“Eh...” I closed the cash register drawer and tossed his receipt in the trash. Somehow I found I couldn’t make eye contact with him—a kind of guilt I didn’t want to

acknowledge right now. “People could live without me. My best trait is my cakes, and people can just buy those.”

“Oh, nonsense. I’ll ask Nancy, I’m sure she’ll be able to set you up with someone. You know, she used to be quite the genius matchmaker back in her day—”

“Spare me.”

“You like girls best, right? Do you have a type?”

Hell if I knew the answer to that anyway. The only person I really had on my mind was the absolute worst person to date anyway. “Still trying to figure it out. Just promise you won’t actually get Nancy on matchmaking duty finding me a wife. *Or* a husband. Or anything else.”

“We’ll have to see about that,” he laughed, taking the little box I’d put his cupcake in. “I’m just saying, no better use of youth than being young. Having fun and making mistakes is part of the process. Spring is the season to fall in love.”

“Spring is the season to make cake. Just like the other three. Have a great day, Anders. Tell Nancy I said hi. In a very happily-single way.”

Anders had only just left before Sam was back at the register with a 7-Up cake, and he gave me a wrinkly, creased hundred-dollar bill, counterfeit-checker pen marks already on it.

“Who in the world bought coffee with a hundred?” I said, checking it with the counterfeit pen before I shoved it into the drawer.

“Paisley. Dunno where she got it.”

“Right. Frankly, who knows why I asked. That’s all for you, Sam?”

“Yes ma’am. Hey—you have anyone you’re going to the festival with?”

I’d had enough of this conversation already. I hung my head. “Me, myself and I. The best company. Are you officially going with Jenna?”

“Oh, no. Nothing like that. We’re not *dating* or anything, not strictly. I mean, just friends. You know how it is.”

God, this guy sucked at lying. I wanted to watch him play poker. “Uh-huh. Well, I hope you two enjoy the cake.”

“Peace out, man,” he said on his way out the door, cake in hand, and I sighed.

Everyone in this town was bizarre. I liked to pretend that was why I was leaving, but I was kind of uselessly in love with the weirdest person in the entire town, so... maybe it was my weakness anyway.

I got a lull between customers after Sam left, the early-morning crowds gone, and I was in the middle of restocking cinnamon buns in the gentle quiet—music playing through the speakers, chatter and laughter from the park not far down the street, the wind murmuring in the trees along Amber Lane—when the door chimed again, and I glanced back to where Emberlynn pushed through the door, a blissful look on her features, heading for the bread racks.

Girl was late. She was usually in here in the mornings. Unfortunately, I knew all too well what it meant when she came in late in the morning smiling that happy smile. It had started when she’d gotten together with Aria, and that was really all I needed or wanted to know. Everyone in Bayview wanted Aria, and Emberlynn was pretty too, a woman on the shorter side with a bob of blonde hair and soft features that had a gentle sort of baby-face look about them, and always dressed nicely to boot, but—it didn’t matter how attractive they both were. I didn’t want to think too much about their sex life.

“Sourdough today?” I said, walking up behind her as she started for the register, and she jolted, giving me a wide-eyed look.

“Christ, you’re going to give me a heart attack,” she said. “You’re not normally lurking in the corner waiting to jump me.”

“I’m normally out on the floor restocking at this time. Not my fault you’re in late.”

“I slept in this morning.”

Sure she did. I’d learned from their next-door neighbor—and Aria’s little sister—Paisley, that they had a thing for morning sex. Poor Paisley looked like she wanted to die about the fact that she knew. Of course, it was really on her for staying up so late every night that she had to hear the morning sex from the next house over to begin with.

I went around to the other side of the counter, ringing up Emberlynn’s sourdough loaf—she came in for a loaf of bread almost every day, always a different one, and she’d base what she’d have for dinner on what bread she got. “Just the sourdough?” I said, bagging it up for her, and she leaned back, looking out the window.

“Maybe a cake? I could use your advice.”

“I’d recommend—”

“Do *not* just recommend the most expensive one.”

I fought back a smile, leaning over the counter, folding my arms on the wood surface. “All right, all right. So—what’s the occasion?”

“Having a little get-together tonight at the park. Kind of a picnic thing to celebrate spring.”

“Paisley’s idea?”

“It’s like you know the woman.”

“A little too well.”

She made a face. I hadn’t even *meant* it like that, but... well, maybe it just slipped out. I had to assume she was just wrinkling her nose at the idea of anybody *knowing* Paisley that way, and not that she had any idea what kind of... ways Paisley and I did know each other.

“We’re having sandwiches,” she said. “Just, you know, cold cuts, cheese, lettuce and tomato, that kind of thing. Seitan

ones too for Priscilla, so her girlfriend doesn't murder me. What do you think for a dessert?"

"Cupcakes? Might be nice to have finger food for a picnic. I have some lemon ones with whipped cream and strawberry filling I think will be a hit."

She settled into a smile, but there was something strained about it. "You're a genius. I'll take them. And obviously, you're invited. I'd assumed Paisley had already passed along the invite."

"I haven't actually seen her since yesterday morning when she was arguing at Hogshead."

She rolled her eyes, a dry smile on her lips. "I'll bet a million dollars she thinks she's invited you and just forgot to actually *do* the inviting part. Probably went to do it and got distracted by cheese. Yeah, if you're free tonight..."

"Yeah, I'm..." I chewed my lip, busying myself moving to the cake display case, traying up the cupcakes in the box. Emberlynn raised her eyebrows.

"It's no pressure, if you're busy. Just a casual thing."

I really was supposed to tell her. Tell *somebody*. What was I going to do, up and disappear one day, and everybody would be left scratching their heads wondering where I'd gone? Emberlynn would be banging at the door to the empty place looking for her bread. And Anders needed to find a new place for mini-cupcakes, or Nancy would be devastated.

But I couldn't. Hardly a surprise. For someone with a reputation for being blunt and saying exactly what I was thinking, I really sucked at saying what I was thinking.

"Nah, I was just thinking about my schedule," I said. "Tonight's all clear. I'll be there. I'll bring some shandies."

"Ugh, I'll have to tie up Paisley to keep her from shotgunning them all."

I set down the box of cupcakes, pausing, looking at the expression she had—something tense there, just under the surface. I bit. "What's bugging you?"

She hung her head. “Am I that obvious?”

“Nah. I just know people’s tells. It’s how I find their pain points and sell them cakes. So, spill.”

She chewed her cheek, casting her gaze to the window as thin, streaky clouds drifted overhead. “It’s kind of...”

“I won’t judge.”

“Okay, but maybe you should. I guess it boils down to that I’m a huge dumbass.”

I put my hands up. “I’m friends with Paisley. I’m used to huge dumbasses.”

She laughed, a glint in her eyes. “Okay, fair point. Um... it’s about my music. You remember that label I was with before? The one that cut me off at the last second?”

I nodded. “They screwed you over, yeah. I don’t blame you for taking a year off music production and never going near them again.”

She scratched her arm absently. “So... that’s where the dumbass part comes back in. They offered me another gig. And I took it.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Masochistic all of a sudden?”

“I *guess*. Hell if I know. Just...” She looked down, fussing with her wallet as she got her card out. Eventually, she mumbled just under her breath. “It’s still a *huge* label. It’s the highest-profile gig I’ve ever been offered. And I just... there’s tons of other producers who work with them all the time. And maybe one bad experience doesn’t mean they’re always going to be awful, you know?”

“I guess, but...” I pursed my lips. “Should I have a cake ready and waiting to comfort you if they fuck you over again?”

“No. I don’t...” She drew herself up taller, forcing in a breath, to meet my eyes. “I don’t think it’s going to go like that. I feel confident. It’s a big company. There’s more than one person there. This team I’m with is completely different from the one before. The guy—I checked—the guy who gave

me the gig and then cut me off before, he's not working at the label anymore altogether. And I know I regretted it and cursed the heavens and wished I'd never taken it, but... I want to give it another chance. Give the company another chance. Give..."

I paused. "Give yourself another chance," I said, finally, and she nodded, her gaze dropping again.

"I guess... yeah."

"You're still dealing with what it did to your self-confidence last time. And you want to prove that it was a fluke."

She let out a harsh sigh. "I guess? Maybe. That's a generous way of looking at it. I thought maybe it was just that I was a dumbass who was easily tempted by money and recognition."

"Can be both." I took her card, swiped it through the machine. "You know, EM? Go for it. Give them hell. I think it's a good idea. You know that even if they screw you over, it won't blindside you, and that you can recover. So if this feels like something you need to do, then do it."

She relaxed into the biggest, most relieved smile, taking her card back as I handed it over. "God, I needed to hear that. I mean, Aria said so, too, but... she'd support me with anything, no matter how harebrained. Thanks, Harps. Just please... if this goes badly, please wait for, like, at *least* six weeks before making fun of me for it."

"Will do." I pulled off the receipt, tossing it into the trash. "I'll sign a contract and everything. But I don't think we'll need it. You're going to ace it. I know you'll come up with something good."

"Well, yeah. I'm a genius."

I laughed drily. "Paisley's rubbing off on you."

She put her hands on her hips. "She's my best friend, we're going to do that. Just because she wrongly thinks she's a genius doesn't mean I can't know I'm a genius."

“Yeah, yeah. I can see the similarities on rare occasions.”
I handed over her bread and cupcakes, a dry smile on my lips.
“You’re all set, Emberlynn. I’ll see you at the picnic, then?”

“Yeah, I’ll text you the updates and stuff. Thanks again.”
She took them with a soft smile, taking a step back from the register. “Catch you there.”

She was a good person. A good producer, too, not to mention a good friend. I probably could have just told her. I needed to get it off my chest to *somebody*, before it tore me apart.

But just... not today.

I was going to miss this place. It was nice seeing what kind of bread Emberlynn came in to buy each morning.

Chapter 2

Paisley

The bubble tea shop was sickeningly adorable, just the way it should have been. Jamie was in line in front of me, and that jerk took forever to order and I had important things to do here, so I sent him a text telling him to look out the front door, and when he checked his phone and turned to the front door of the place, I cut in line in front of him just as the person Kay was ringing up now moved on ahead and gave an opening for me. Jamie shot me a betrayed look, but he'd live.

“Hey, Paisley,” Kay said, beaming at me. “What’re you having this time?”

I put my hands on my hips. “You.”

She faltered. “Er... I’m taken. That’s really flattering, though!”

Kay was unbearable sometimes. She was so sweet and sunshiney and positive, and I still couldn’t get my head around the idea that *she* of all people in this world was dating Gwen, the crabbiest woman I ever adored.

Still, she had fit right into Bayview ever since she moved here in December. She was the kind of bubbly, easy personality everyone in town liked, and at the rate things were going, people were going to start liking *her* more than they liked *me*. Which—really, it hardly seemed fair, didn’t it?

She fit the aesthetic of the place like a horse fit the water, or whatever the saying was—with her bright blue hair and piercings, wearing the pink-and-blue uniform of the place, she looked like a set piece here.

Still, she wasn’t supposed to be here.

“Ha, ha,” I said. “Very funny, Kay. What I *mean* is what are you doing here? Your girlfriend is going to spend the whole picnic complaining bitterly to everyone in earshot if

you're not there. Do you really want me—*me*, Paisley Macleod—to have to listen to that?"

Kay scratched her head. "Far be it from me to do that to the venerable Paisley Macleod, but—I have a shift here. Trust me, I really want to go, but..."

"You can ask Dani. She'll let you take off for the event."

Her expression faltered. "I wouldn't want to cause any trouble for her... she's been so good to me and everything. It's fine. I can stick it out."

I put my hands up. "Meaning you didn't even ask? Good lord. I guess I have to do everything myself. Also, just like... a small bubble tea for me please. Whatever the one Emby got last time was, I want that. I'm gonna rub it in her face."

"Small green tea boba with—Paisley?"

Kay stopped halfway through ringing me up as I pushed through the swinging door behind the counter, heading for the back.

"What are you—"

"Oh, just put it on my tab," I called, pushing through the swing door into the back of house. Tidying up boxes on shelves was Dani, a tall brunette with an athletic build, hair up in a ponytail, and she glanced sidelong at me.

"Paisley," she said. "How nice to see you back here."

"Kay needs to take off for the party," I said cheerfully. Dani let out a noncommittal noise, turning back to the boxes.

"I didn't realize you were the staffing manager here."

"You're not going to keep her, are you? Gwen's going to be outraged. And if Gwen is outraged, then she's going to yell at Annabel."

Score. Dani's expression faltered just a little. She'd hooked up with Annabel once or twice, and my sources told me she *totally* still had a crush. I put the pressure on while I had the advantage.

“Half the regular crowd is going to be there, so there’s no use running up operating costs while nobody’s coming by, right?”

Dani hung her head. “I guess if everyone’s going to be over there, I could close solo... does Kay *want* to take off?”

“Uh, duh. It’s only the most amazing party ever. You should come by once you’re done closing, too. Maybe hit on Annabel.”

She turned her back to me, opening a box and rifling through the contents. “Annabel has a girlfriend,” she said idly.

“Oh, am I the one who gets to break the news to you? Man, you’re behind on things. It’s an open relationship. And Annabel still likes hookups.”

She paused. I turned back to the door, a bounce in my step.

“I’ll tell Kay she can take off once you’re done with the count?”

“S-sure.”

Another win for Paisley. I was going to have to get a trophy wall soon to hold them all.

I strode back out through the door just as Kay set down the cute green bubble tea drink that Emberlynn had been a cruel monster yesterday and refused to let me steal, and I picked it up and took a long sip.

“Oh my god, it’s so good I’m gonna cry,” I said. “Also, Dani says you can take off once she’s done with the count.”

Kay stopped, eyes wide. “She did? Really? Er—how did you—”

“Paisley has her ways.”

She laughed, eyes sparkling. “Paisley does have her ways. Wow. I don’t know how to thank you. I was so bummed I’d have to miss it.”

“You can thank me by not charging me for the drink?”

Kay laughed. “Um... no. And we don’t do tabs.”

“Dammit. It was worth a try.” I went begrudgingly with her to the register, where I had to make the great personal sacrifice of swiping my card, and Jamie still gave me a disbelieving look as he stepped up to the register next to place his order. I stood off to the corner, underneath the shelves of cute knickknacks, and I took a picture of myself with the drink and texted it to Emberlynn, typing a caption underneath.

guess who’s the winner now????

She replied right away. *I’m not jealous that you bought your own, if this was some weird ploy for that*

I rolled my eyes. *ugh!!! you’re boring. I’m showing off to Harper instead*

She started typing, and then she stopped, and then after too long for such a short message, she sent, *Go for it*

I wrinkled my nose. I... probably shouldn’t have blabbed to Emberlynn about having fucked Harper that one time. It had made things awkward between me and Emby every time Harps came up. It had been an *accident*. And at least I didn’t mention the second time.

I texted back, *managed to free kay from the shackles of modern employment for the evening so she’s coming to the picnic!!! want anything from here?*

hey, you finally have some good news. thanks, Pais. I’m all good tho, see you two soon

I stuck out my tongue at the screen. *I am good news, em*

Not content with showing off to just my loser best friend, I went to text the selfie to Harper too, but I paused looking at it before I went back in and ran it through a filter. Just clearing up my complexion a little. It was fine if I looked like a raggedy mess to Emberlynn, but... to other people I just wanted to look good.

guess what I have that you doooooooooonnnn”””””tttttt

She replied even faster than Emberlynn had. *who the fuck stretches out an apostrophe like that*

I scoffed. *me!!!*

There was no reply for a while, and I glanced over as Dani came out from the back, pulling on an apron and talking to Kay in low voices. The way Dani wouldn't make eye contact with Kay, fussing with other things—that whole *open-relationship* revelation had really done a number on her. I could practically hear her fantasizing about hitting on Annabel at the party.

Another excellent job done by Paisley Macleod.

My phone lit up with a text from Harper, a selfie of her with a massive cake. She'd used a filter, too, so at least I wasn't the only one. *guess what i have that you doooooonn ""tttt*

Surreptitiously, I scanned both ways before I saved the picture. It wasn't a weird thing—Emberlynn would never let me live it down—but I just liked seeing pictures of my friends happy. It was nice to have a collection.

trade? I replied quickly.

a hundred-fifty-dollar cake for a five-dollar drink you've probably mostly finished by now. tempting. somehow i will pass up on this.

boo. you're going to the picnic, right? you never replied to my invite.

invite?? you never sent me an invite

I rolled my eyes. *oh my god woman pay attention!!! I sent you a letter and everything!*

a letter??? why a fucking letter?

Admittedly, I hadn't really thought about that. I'd just had paper and a pen and a fancy envelope—come to think of it, I wasn't sure where I'd gotten the envelope—so it felt like the obvious thing to do. I'd spent, like, an hour styling the letter making it pretty, too, and she was just going to ignore it?

Honestly, I didn't know why I bothered with the effort. People didn't deserve all of me.

“You didn’t need to wait for me,” Kay said, stepping over from behind the counter to where I was standing in the corner. I scowled.

“And walk over there alone? Like a loser? I was just showing off my drink to my friends anyway.”

She laughed, eyes sparkling. Out of everyone in Bayview, I think Kay had the most genuine laugh, like she’d never heard of anything other than just... big smiles and genuine compliments and sunshine and rainbows. “You’re a mystery as ever, Paisley. You mind if I head upstairs and just get changed first? I want to look cute.”

“Only on the condition I get to raid your fridge for cheese.”

She beamed. “Go for it. I have gouda.”

I scowled. “*Gouda?* Do I look like an animal? Ugh, I’ll pass.”

“I didn’t realize you had such strong feelings...”

Still, I followed her upstairs, chattering about how Oliver was going to be at the party too and how that was probably enough said about that, the rumors about him and Connor and to keep an eye out to see if they made out at any point, and at some point I realized we were in her cute little apartment above the bubble tea place and she’d shut the bedroom door between us for her to get changed. I shrugged and helped myself to her fridge, checking for cheese, but alas, she really did just have the gouda. The woman was uncultured.

“Ready to go?” Kay said, once she’d stepped out of the bedroom, dressed like a poster advert with a plaid pleated skirt and fishnets leggings and sleeves, and I didn’t even know they *made* fishnet sleeves. She’d thrown on more accessories than I think I owned, total.

“Jeez, you dress like you give a damn,” I said. “I can’t fathom it. Yeah, I’m ready.”

“You look cute like that. It’s a... signature style.”

Coming from anybody else, that would sound like a veiled insult. I was wearing an oversized sweater and shorts, and my hair looked like it had just gone through a wind tunnel, I knew. Kay didn't know how to insult people, though.

I wasn't going to push the topic either way. If I protested too much, she'd start to get the idea I was insecure, and that topic would spread like wildfire. I was supposed to be the queen of gossip. The gossip couldn't be about *me*. And I guess I just... didn't want certain people knowing certain things about how I felt about certain things.

"So, just to check," I said, mostly just to change the subject as we headed downstairs and out into the brisk spring air, "you moved into your own place instead of moving in with Gwen because you'd never in your life agree on décor, right?"

She shrugged, looking up to the sky, her hands in her jacket pockets. "Um... I think it's more just that I needed this."

"A shorter commute? Want to be able to just fall down the stairs and end up at work?"

"Nah. Just—you know, my own place, my own thing. I love Gwen to death, but... ugh, I always wanted so badly to have some kind of self-determination. Living with my parents was just awful, looking back on it. I need to have some time of having a space where I make my own decisions, I do what feels right to me."

I clapped a hand on her back, and she stumbled. "Ugh, I so get that. Getting away from my family, needing my own space, and then just getting to be the lord of that space? It rules."

"Didn't you use that space to, like... breed lizards, or something? Maybe you can't be trusted with that responsibility."

"Hey—leave the Ultimate Lizard out of this."

She grinned at me. "Cute name."

"He wasn't *cute*, he was powerful and fearsome and..."

“And?”

I put a hand to my chest. “And was too great to be contained.”

“He ran away.”

“Well, yeah. I made some mistakes.”

She laughed, and we settled into a silence walking side-by-side, cutting across town in the direction of Amber Lane and the park where Emberlynn would probably already be set up ten minutes early, until I couldn't bear the silence any longer.

“But you think you're going to move in with her eventually?”

“Mm. Probably. I'm just going with where the wind leads. Mostly I'm just focusing on doing the best I can, being the best I can...”

I frowned, an anxious sensation in my stomach. I pushed it down, looking the other way at a brick wall painted with street art.

“I kind of admire you, honestly,” she said. “You're just so naturally cool, unbothered... like you're not caught up in this race to be better all the time.”

The less I thought about this, the better. I bumped up my voice a decibel. “That's because I'm already the best! There's no being better than this.”

She stopped, giving me a look. “Um... sorry. Did I touch on a sore spot?”

“I don't have sore spots.”

She chewed her cheek. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to.”

I slumped. “Ugh, that's embarrassing. I thought I could lie my way out. Forget I said anything. I don't do this kind of thing.”

She smiled sweetly at me. “You can totally share things with me, you know. I'm not judgmental.”

“No way. Nuh-uh. Not happening.”

She elbowed me lightly. “Tell.”

“No!”

“Tell?”

“Oh my god, you sound like me. Am I that insufferable?”

She batted her eyelashes at me. I probably *was* that insufferable. I made a mental note to change absolutely nothing about my behavior, and I turned back ahead, hunching my shoulders.

“Sometimes I just wonder what I’m doing with my life,” I said.

“Mm.” She turned her gaze ahead with me, walking slowly. “It’s a lifelong process, I think, figuring it out.”

“Yeah, well... maybe I don’t want to bother. That sounds like a lot of work.”

“I don’t think it has to be. Why not find the things that feel like play?”

“Pfeh.” I kicked at the sidewalk. “I have it all already. I run a cute little bookstore, and the operating costs are low enough and the margins are high enough that I get all the money I need with, like, zero effort, but I don’t really make a lot more money if I put in more effort, so it’s just chill. I go in there when I want to vibe and hang out with cool books. I eat cheese all the time, I have a bunch of cool friends who hang out with me, and I get to keep up with the gossip. I love gossip. I eat it up.”

“I’ve heard that once or twice about you.”

“I guess I just don’t get the point. Paisley is Paisley. I’m just me. I’m gonna keep on being me. So... going with the windy leads.”

“I don’t think you got the saying quite right.”

“I did.”

She shrugged, looking up at where clouds streaked in thin white ribbons over the brilliant cerulean of the sky. “Springtime is the season of love, isn’t it?”

“Yup. The season for me to love myself.”

“Is there a reason you don’t date?”

I scrunched up my face. The fact that the last thing I’d had going was with Harper, and that was just two instances of accidentally having sex... I didn’t want to think about it. Luckily, I specialized in not thinking. “Nobody’s good enough for me.”

She pouted, putting her hands on her hips, turning to face me. “You know, I’m going to spill what Priscilla said about you.”

Oh, god. I didn’t need that in my life. “Asking Priscilla about me should be banned.”

“She said you seem so... scared.” She dropped her arms, a soft sympathy on her face that I couldn’t deal with right now. Or ever, actually. “Like you’re worried *you’re* not good enough for other people. Like the flippant attitude is—”

“Ugh, I’m going to teach her a lesson.” I spun on my heel. “She’ll see! I’m gonna go talk about her girlfriend until she dies of embarrassment. That will be my revenge.”

“You know,” she said, walking quicker to keep up with me, “it’s okay to have insecurities and worries—”

“Just don’t *tell* anyone about this conversation,” I said, waving her off as I marched on ahead. “If this gets out as gossip, I’m gonna literally kill everyone in the universe.”

“That’s quite a commitment...”

“I’m a very committed person!”

She laughed. “It’s a promise. Under one condition.”

I whirled on her, my jaw dropping. “Oh my god. You’re blackmailing me? When I look this good?”

“Yeah.”

“Dammit. Well, I respect the brazen audacity. Fine, what’s your condition?”

She grinned. “Talk more about it. I’ll come hang at your place tomorrow, and you can spill what’s on your mind?”

I wrinkled my nose. “Ew. I’d rather get stabbed to death with a rusty garden rake used to till manure into damp soil filled with grasshoppers on a hot summer day.”

“That’s concerningly specific…”

Kay was way too much like me in a lot of ways, and unfortunately, I probably wasn’t shaking her. Woe be upon me. I hung my head. “Ugh, fine. Just bring better food than gouda. Anything but gouda.”

“Sure thing,” she laughed, strolling on ahead again, a big smile on her face. “I’ll look forward to it.”

I help a damsel in distress out of a shift, and this was what I got in return?

Well, whatever. She was bringing food.

Chapter 3

Harper

Priscilla managed to tear her eyes off Annabel long enough to nudge me in the side with a knowing smile, gesturing towards the park entrance, where Kay and Paisley walked in side-by-side. “There’s your girl,” she said, and I shot her a withering look.

“You really think I’m out to steal Gwen’s girlfriend?”

Priscilla just rolled her eyes with a tired smile, and I felt—like I always did when it was her involved—like she’d just laid me bare and obvious for all the world to see. I hoped I wasn’t blushing. It was a bad habit I had when I got called out.

She was the youngest of our friend group, still in university, and she’d somehow maintained the freshman sense of dressing well even into her upper years, wearing a white sundress with a sunhat and her ash-blonde hair pulled back into a loose, effortlessly classy plait, a green ribbon tied into it. I needed to not hang out with her, Aria, and Emberlynn in the same space. They gave me inferiority complexes. I just wore jeans and t-shirts.

But more than that, Priscilla had a strange talent for knowing exactly what a person was hiding by just looking at them, and she’d rendered me completely undone last year when she watched me fumble the littlest bit too much in front of Paisley and immediately pinpointed how I felt. And she didn’t relent until I’d admitted to it.

We’d managed not to talk about it—Priscilla had spent the winter cuffing up so much with Annabel, ever since they went official back in December, that the topic had drifted away. But maybe it was that I’d been thinking about it earlier today, with Anders and all the talk about falling in love, and just that Priscilla, as she always did, figured me out in a blink.

“Somehow,” Priscilla said, finally, “I wasn’t actually referring to the one who’s taken.”

I rolled my eyes, shoving my hands in my pockets, and I found I couldn’t look directly at her. “Paisley’s essentially also taken. She’s in love with herself.”

“You know, I think she likes you, too. You should go for it.”

I rubbed my forehead. “It’s complicated... and it’s not even relevant.”

“Because of that thing you’re hiding?”

I shot her a wild-eyed look, my heart jumping into my mouth, but I didn’t get a chance to say anything before Paisley came streaking through the small crowd of people who had gathered around the picnic tables, made a beeline for me, and then I swear to fucking god she sat down on my lap, *facing me*. Every muscle in my body strained to the breaking point all at once, but she just gave me her signature big Paisley grin.

“Yo,” she said.

“Pais, what the fuck are you doing?” I tried not to register Priscilla raising her eyebrows high next to me. Paisley gave me a mischievous grin.

“Close your eyes.”

If she kissed me like this, I’d fucking die. Only after I killed her, though. I tried to pretend my heart wasn’t pounding. Pray to god Paisley wasn’t close enough to tell. “You’re going to snap my neck if I do.”

She grinned wider. “Just do it.”

I should have argued, but I closed my eyes. My stomach lurched when I felt Paisley move, and then—a rattling from behind me, the clinking of cans, and then Paisley laughing maniacally as she jumped off my lap. My eyes shot open, and I scowled at where she was opening a can of shandy—the cans I’d kept behind me specifically so Paisley wouldn’t walk in and grab them. I was going to break her like a twig.

And... pretend I wasn't getting this sinking feeling like rejection.

"Thanks, Harps," she said, doing a terrible job suppressing laughter. I sighed.

"You're very lucky there's too many witnesses here for me to murder you."

"You wouldn't. You love me." She winked, taking a swig from the can, and I thought most likely I would murder her because I unfortunately *did* love her.

It didn't make any sense. She'd never done anything but annoy me. We butted heads constantly. She wasn't even my type. At least... she shouldn't have been. She was a scrawny thing with wild, unkempt brown hair and big round glasses, wearing a Harvard sweatshirt that was about six sizes too big and out of place given she had definitely never gone to Harvard, and—even though everyone in Bayview loved her as the chaotic gremlin creature she was, myself included, it was really her I had to fall in love with? *Her?*

I didn't even know how it had happened, but I wanted to take it all back. Maybe that was why I'd agreed when Susanna Holcomb had asked me to leave Bayview.

Of course, it was probably for other reasons. Bigger reasons. But I didn't go near that.

"You sure took your sweet time showing up," I said. "Too busy getting bubble tea and kidnapping employees?"

Next to her, Kay laughed, eyes sparkling. "I owe her one. I'd have been standing there staring sadly off into the distance in an empty shop for hours otherwise..."

Paisley shrugged, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "Now it's just Dani who's going to be doing that. You know—staring into infinity pining over Annabel."

Priscilla put her hands up. "I'm sure Annabel would be interested. She should just ask."

I shoved down the messy tangle of feelings I got hearing her say that. She was just so... comfortable in the situation,

had so much trust in their relationship. Annabel and I had broken up specifically because of that—because I couldn't handle Annabel still being attracted to other women—but there was Priscilla, as relaxed as could be and loving what they had.

I think I was afraid it would be a jealous feeling. And maybe it was, but not quite like I'd expected. Just... it was nice knowing Annabel and Priscilla had found something so happy together. And maybe part of me just wished I could, too.

But I wasn't the kind of person who could be with somebody. That was for other people. People who weren't like me.

"That's what I told her," Paisley said, throwing a hand in the air. "Like, hello. She didn't even know you two have an open relationship. She looked like she'd seen the gates of heaven when I told her. So... probably expect her coming around shooting her shot."

Priscilla laughed, tucking a strand of hair back behind her ear. "I'll give Annabel the heads-up."

The park was getting livelier by the minute, the start time just a minute or two away and the guests all showing, squeezing into the space by the birchwood pavilion and the lattice draped in its romantic white netting for the spring. Past Paisley and Kay, I caught a glimpse of Emberlynn and Aria moving through all the guests, greeting them warmly in the way both of them were natural geniuses at, before Emberlynn broke off and came up behind Paisley, snatching the shandy out of her hand from behind. Paisley whirled on her with a scandalized gasp.

"Emby! Oh my god, this is grand larceny."

"Uh-huh, sure. And my next crime is going to be battery when I throw the drink on you, you dork. Can you at least wait until the event starts before you go stealing all the drinks Harper brought?"

Paisley put a hand on her hip. "Um, evidently not."

I stood up, stretching my arms out, avoiding looking at Paisley. “We getting started?”

“Yup.” Emberlynn nodded back to the picnic table she and Aria had covered in food, my cake sitting in the middle. “Help yourself. Gwen’s getting the sound system to work.”

Kay bit down on the biggest smile, the kind she always got when someone so much as mentioned Gwen. I was honestly obsessed with the two of them. Everyone else in town thought they were the strangest couple, but I couldn’t get enough of how ridiculously in love they were. “I’m gonna go... say hi to her,” Kay said. “I’m sure I can help her figure out the sound system.”

Paisley sighed melodramatically, watching her all but skip away towards the pavilion where the sound system was set up. “We’re never getting sound. Kay’s gonna make out with her over the stereo for ages.”

Emberlynn wrinkled her nose. “Maybe I should disconnect the speakers. I wouldn’t want them to accidentally connect the microphone while they’re going at it.”

Luckily, though, they didn’t start going at it over the microphone. The music came on after only a short delay, and we all gathered around the table grabbing drinks, sandwiches and chips on paper plates. I managed to avoid too much of either Priscilla or Paisley, chatting with friends I hadn’t seen in a minute—I didn’t leave the house much in winter, and I’d missed more than one social event because of seasonal affective disorder. Plenty to catch up on.

Not that I knew why I was putting so much effort into catching up if I knew I was leaving.

It wore me down somewhere after we’d all gone through the sandwiches and moved to cake, once I’d finished listening to a dozen people compliment the cupcakes, and I found myself coming down into a cool, numb sensation. My feet led me away from it all, and I ended up leaning against the cold metal railing over where the stream was running high right now, swelling on last night’s rainstorm. Tucked in here behind the pale green blooms of spring’s first flowers and the trees

starting to get their color back, it was peaceful, quiet, breathing in the fresh, clean air, but I didn't get much peace.

Footsteps along the earth behind me pulled my attention back to where Priscilla gave me a soft smile, leaning against the railing with me. She didn't say anything—probably figured out just by looking how much I was wound up. She probably knew why, even though I didn't.

“Dani come around and start hitting on your girlfriend, and you had to get away?” I said, and she laughed lightly.

“It doesn't actually bother me, you know, when it happens. It's not that I just stick it out well and stay strong for her sake. It just... doesn't register as something that bothers me.” She paused, shifting her weight onto one foot. “Do you think that's weird?”

“Weird... probably strictly in that it's not how people typically are, but I don't think there's anything wrong with it.” I turned back to the stream with a sigh. “Kind of wish I were that way. Things would have gone a lot better with Annabel. You two are a much better fit, though, so... I guess I'm glad.”

She rolled her eyes. “Please. As if it was ever about Annabel in the first place.”

I hung my head. “This is you harassing me about Paisley again, isn't it?”

“You've already told me how you feel, so... there's no use trying to hide things. What's more relevant is the reason you're staying so withdrawn from... you know, everything. Like you're guilty and conflicted about connecting with people right now. What happened?”

I rubbed my forehead. “It's just... some stuff with the bakery. Don't worry about it.”

“Mm.” She looked down. “If you ever want to talk about it, you know it's safe to tell me. I'm not a gossip.”

She really wasn't, that was the thing. I could trust her not only to keep it secret, but to listen patiently and with care. So why on earth couldn't I bring myself to tell even her?

“Thanks,” I said, after a pause. “What about you, though? I haven’t had a chance to properly chat with you since the new semester started. How’s it going?”

“I took too many writing-intensive courses at once, that’s how it’s going,” she said with a wry laugh. “I’m stretched a little bit... thin.”

“Priscilla, being an academic overachiever. Shocking. Well, if Annabel’s ever bringing a girl over and you need somewhere else to stay and study, you can hang out at my place.”

“Thanks,” she laughed. “I really appreciate how you were there for me through so much... stuff, last semester.”

“Swimming going okay?”

“It’s been really exciting. I’ve been having private coaching once a week with someone from the Olympic division. It’s intense, but...”

“Doesn’t that mean you have three coaches at once?”

She beamed. “Yeah, two at once is nothing new for me, but three at once is one hell of an experience.”

I blinked. She furrowed her brow.

“I really could have worded that better.”

“I’m sure Annabel would approve, though.”

“I mean, it’s *true* that we’ve had—”

“I don’t want to know.”

She laughed, turning back to the stream below us. “It’s a lot going on, and yeah, I’m exhausted. This is the first time all month I’ve gone out anywhere fun. But... I’m enjoying it, you know?”

I gave her a long, studying look. “You know... you still never really said if you actually *want* to go to the Olympics.”

“Mm. I’ve been thinking about it, you know?” She shrugged, turning around and leaning backwards against the railing, casting her gaze up to where the canopies of the trees

were in half-bloom swaying overhead. “And honestly, I don’t know either. But what I do know is that I want to try. I don’t know if I actually care about the Olympics, but I do know that I... I want to find the limits of my abilities. And to go as far as that will take me. So the Olympics are more a means than an end.”

“Huh.” I turned and sank back against the railing next to her, following her gaze up, watching the strips of darkening sky through the trees. “That’s pretty smart.”

“I try.”

“Any idea what you’re doing after graduation?”

Her smile faltered. “Um... I’m still figuring it out.”

I shrugged. “Your life has changed a ton in the past year. It makes sense you wouldn’t know how to plan for the future.”

“Yeah, I guess so...” She kicked lightly at the earth. “My mom told me I could work with her, travel alongside her and help with the business. And I think I’d have no problems getting a job in DC or something. And I feel like I *should*—be doing something big, chasing the limits of my potential—but I don’t want to leave Bayview.”

“Your mom’s been working from wherever she likes in the world. Couldn’t that be Bayview?”

“Yeah, maybe. I guess it’s just about... figuring out what I’m supposed to be doing with myself.”

“Loaded word, *supposed to*.”

“No kidding. I’m just focusing on the here and now.” She turned to me with a big smile. “Thanks for hearing me out, though. I always feel like I can trust you with these things.”

“Anytime.” I smiled lightly at her. “Thanks for sharing.”

“So now, in exchange, you’ll tell me why you won’t ask Paisley out?”

I wrinkled my nose. “Because I’d rather fall off a bridge and die?”

“That seems a bit dramatic...”

“There’s nothing between me and her. Just a little crush that’s all history now.” I pushed away from the railing, starting back in the direction of where I could hear the party settling down, the chatter dwindling away. “I appreciate you being supportive, though.”

“Hey, I’m just saying...” She pushed off from the railing too, keeping up with me. “Running away from my feelings certainly didn’t work. And running towards them did. Even when it was hard.”

It wasn’t that I wanted to run away. Just... I wish there were some way to convey to Priscilla that it was *different*. Some way to get it across without making her hate me for it.

“Thanks,” I said offhandedly. “We’ll see.”

Chapter 4

Paisley

Emberlynn caught me stealing a cupcake to go, and she raised an eyebrow at me.

“Where are you even running off to?”

“I’m not running off.”

“You’ve got that running-off look in your eyes. Don’t think I can’t recognize the look of crime in your expression.”

I pouted, shoving half the cupcake into my mouth. “Harps ran away. I’m tracking her down.”

“She went home for the night. That’s a reasonable thing to do at the end of a party.”

“Yeah, but she didn’t say goodbye to me, and *how* can anybody leave without saying something to the star of the show? So. I’m off to right her wrongs.” I waved the cupcake half generally in her direction, talking with my mouth full. “Thanks for the party, EM. You’re wearing yourself too thin. I’m cooking you dinner tomorrow.”

“God, I need that. I’m dead on my feet. Thanks, Pais.” She paused, looking like she was debating whether to say something. I scowled, swallowing the cake before I spoke.

“Say it, bastard.”

“Nope.”

“Do it or I’ll punch you in the nuts.”

“I don’t have... forget it. You don’t want me to say it.”

“Are you challenging me?” I put my hand on my hips. “Now you’re legally required to say it.”

She sighed, folding her arms. “Okay, fine. You asked for it. Are you fucking Harper again?”

“I—” I almost dropped the cupcake. “Oh my god, EM, I thought we agreed never to speak about that again.”

“Someone wouldn’t let me not say it.”

I huffed, turning away. “It was just a random thing we did, like, almost a year ago. It’s in the past.”

“Almost a—” She did a double take. “Hold on.”

I blanched. “Almost... four years ago, is what I meant to say. I forgot how time works.”

“You did it *again*?”

“No!” I hugged my arms under my chest. “Ugh, stop being such a voyeur, EM.”

“I *knew* something had happened after I’d first moved over to New York. You slept with—”

“*Shh*. There’s still people. Oh my god. I’ll kill you.”

She leaned in closer, dropping her voice to a fiery whisper. “What, did you take another trip to the lighthouse? Have someone stand you up again?”

“No! Oh my god. We were just hanging out on the boat —”

“On the *boat*? This time you fucked her on a boat?”

“Oh my god, I didn’t mean to say that. God, you’re nosy.”

“First off, I never thought I’d see a world where *you* call someone else nosy. Secondly—you expect me to believe that you fuck her twice, years apart, and that there’s still nothing there?”

“Ugh, Emberlynn.” I set the cupcake down, putting both hands on my hips, scowling at her. “Let a girl fuck every now and then! It doesn’t mean anything! Sometimes these things just happen!”

“*Just happen* and you *just happen* to record it, too?”

“Hey, I wasn’t the one recording it this time!”

She paled. I paled, too.

“I didn’t mean to say that out loud.”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” she said.

“Please forget I said anything.”

“So now you both have recordings of you two having sex.”

“*Shh*. I haven’t watched mine in ages anyway.”

“So you *do* still have the password.”

“Oh! Um. I, uh, found it... on a sticky note... in the basement...”

“Uh-huh.” She folded her arms. “And didn’t use it to delete the file. Jesus Christ, woman. Just admit you have a thing with her.”

“No! We just... accidentally had sex a couple times, that’s *it!*”

“Nobody *accidentally* fingers someone over a lighthouse railing, Paisley, let alone *accidentally* records it.”

“Ugh. It’s not about that, anyway!” I turned away, hunching my shoulders, snatching the cupcake back up. “I just want to hang out with her. Just because we happened to find ourselves maybe having a little sex here and there doesn’t mean we can’t hang out, you sicko.”

“I’m going to pierce my own eardrums so I don’t have to hear you keep talking about this...”

“You keep asking!”

“You keep fucking her!”

“She’s *really* good!” I pursed my lips. “Um... let’s pretend I didn’t say that.”

“I will genuinely be doing everything in my power to do just that.” She rubbed her forehead, waving me off. “Please. Just go. Go find Harper and do not, I beg you, let me know what happens next.”

Ugh. What a jerk. I was wasted on her. And just because I liked to have sex every now and then! As if it was a crime to

top Harper!

I fumed the whole way out of the park, in between sips of my shandy until I finished it off not far from Harper's house, and I spotted the light on in her bedroom. I went around to the back and hiked up my sleeves and tucked my shirt into my shorts before I climbed up the tree behind the house, the bark rough against my fingers as I hoisted myself up to the rooftop terrace. With a grunt, I swung myself over the railing and stumbled a little on the tiles, my shoes clicking, and I kicked my shoes off before I opened the door and headed down the stairs and into the living room.

I paused at the door to her bedroom before I thought better of it. I turned first to the kitchen and helped myself through her fridge—it was always safest to go in with a food-based bribe—but I paused halfway through assembling a cheese tray when I noticed a cake she didn't make.

It was a small thing, square, black with elegant white piping, one quarter taken out to show a marble cake with a dense crumb. The shimmery silver tray it was on had a distinctive design around the edges, and one corner read *FONTAINE SQUARE* in curling letters.

That was weird.

I grabbed my phone from my back pocket and looked it up, and I only had more questions the longer I looked. For one, they were based in New York, which was, in fact, not here. For two—it was apparently some kind of ultra-luxe company doing cakes and pastry catering for super-high-profile events. I got pictures of the two directors, David Fontaine and Susanna Holcomb, alongside celebrities and everything.

I knew Harps had taken a trip to New York over the winter, but I didn't know she'd gone to any super-fancy events. And it was too long ago to have brought back a cake. And who brought an entire cake home from an event, anyway? I mean, aside from me.

Something was shady. She had said she was talking with some interesting people lately. If she was working with a high-class catering firm to create the ultimate party in Bayview, I

needed to be in on things. So—it was probably only fair that I read her mail.

I snuck carefully downstairs, into the bakery, where all the lights were shut off, and I slipped into the back office, where her desktop computer was on a flimsy wooden desk. I woke it up, and when it asked for a PIN, I tried the one Harper gave me for the door lock one time, 5571.

Hi, Harper.

Girl sucked at cybersecurity. She had this coming to her.

I pulled up her web browser and checked her email—it was open to her business email, which was all I was really concerned with. Mostly updates from her suppliers, orders, a newsletter subscription she'd clearly signed up for accidentally with her work email instead of her regular email, updates from the property manager, the like.

It took a bit of scrolling before I found the one from Susanna Holcomb, and I almost scrolled past it before I remembered the name. I clicked on it, an email exchange coming up on the screen, and I scrolled to the top.

Hey Harper,

It's Susanna, from Fontaine. I wanted to reach out and say thanks again for visiting us! It was such a pleasure to meet you, and we're really excited to discuss what happens next.

I've attached the PDF with all the information for our partners. Look through it and try to let me know soon what you think, all right?

Message me if you have any questions!

Partners. I frowned, a heavy weight settling in my stomach, as I scrolled through.

Partners. Harper's replies, and her conversation going through the intricacies of the work, made an ugly picture take crystal clarity.

Harper wasn't visiting fancy events and getting luxury catering for a bomb-ass event or something. Harper was

ditching Crystal Lights Bakery to go work for Fontaine Square instead.

And she was leaving Bayview at the end of April to do it.

And she hadn't *told* me.

Behind me, the sound of someone clearing her throat made me jump, and I whirled back on where Harper leaned in the door to the office, her arms folded, glaring at me.

"Paisley," she said.

"Shh. Not now. I'm reading." I turned back to the computer.

"Hm. Indeed you are."

It only hit me when I got to the end of the email exchange that it was Harper behind me, watching me read her emails. I whirled back on her again, my heart jumping, and I shot her a withering look.

"*Harper*. What are you doing here?"

"Investigating the strange poltergeist that halfway-assembled a cheese board on my kitchen table and then went to poke through my computer."

"Oh, shoot. I forgot the cheese."

Her frown deepened, and her eyes darkened in a way I wasn't used to seeing from her. "May I ask why you're reading my emails, Paisley?"

I frowned, clasping my hands at my waist. "May I ask when you were planning on telling everybody that you're moving out of town?"

A look of panic flickered briefly over her expression, and she put a hand over her forehead. "Dammit. I don't know why I thought I could keep anything to myself in a town where Paisley lives."

"Were you planning on telling me at all?" A heavy weight coalesced in my stomach, a sick feeling now. I'd just been screwing around, playing games, and suddenly I stood in

the middle of something much too serious. Much too heavy. It felt like I'd been gorging myself on chocolates and suddenly lurched into feeling sick.

Harper looked away. "Why would I need to? Clearly you just help yourself to my things and find out."

"This is that person you've been talking to lately? Ever since December, you've been planning on leaving all of us without telling us?"

She sighed, hard, stepping back out of the office and gesturing me to the back door of the building. "Why don't you go ahead and head home now, Pais?"

"No, I'm pretty comfortable here." My voice came out colder and smaller than I'd expected. Harper narrowed her eyes.

"I am *telling* you to get the fuck out of my office and stop looking through my private computer."

"Oh, yeah? And what's stopping me from going and telling everyone in Bayview about how you're apparently just up and running away without... without even saying a word about it?"

"Great question. What's stopping me from telling everyone how you break into my house and raid my computer to read my private email exchanges?"

I put my hands on my hips. "Name one person who would be surprised."

She faltered. "Dammit. Fair point."

All of a sudden, all the nerves and anxiety, the frustration and the betrayal, melted into something so sad I just wanted to cry. I softened, and I took a step closer. She backed away, but I came closer again, and she didn't retreat this time, letting me get close enough I put a hand on her arm.

"Are you actually leaving?" I said, and I think I saw her heart break, the whole thing playing out over her features.

Quietly, she turned away, and she didn't say anything—moved to speak, stopped, and fell back into silence.

“Harper?”

She gestured me, haltingly, to the stairs. “There’s... I’ve got a cake from them. Let’s... we might as well at least share it.”

I’d never heard an invitation for cake sound so sad. I walked, quietly, with her up the stairs, and I felt an antsy sensation through every part of my body, like I would just burst, rip apart on the spot. I wanted to scream and demand answers from her. I think I was shaking. I wasn’t sure where this had come from—I knew full well I didn’t want her to leave, but this? This?

She pulled the Fontaine Square cake out of the fridge once we got into her kitchen, and she brewed two cups of coffee. Her regular bedtime was in an hour, but... I didn’t question it. I sat with her as she sliced the cake in two pieces and slid me one with a coffee.

“It’s a marble cake. From—”

“I know. I saw it when I was looking for cheese. That’s why I went looking for what Fontaine Square was.”

She rubbed her forehead. “God, in the middle of all this, I forgot about the cheese. Why were you raiding the fridge for cheese?”

“I came in to say hi, but you normally get upset when I come in through the roof, so I thought I’d bribe you with cheese.”

“Bribe me. With my own food. Also, will you *stop* climbing onto the roof?”

“I guess I will, if you aren’t even going to live here anymore.”

She fell silent again. Fuming, I jabbed at the cake, feeling like I was stabbing Susanna Holcomb for stealing *my* friend away from Bayview. Harper was supposed to stay *here*. She was supposed to stay with *me*.

The cake was really good, though.

Finally, Harper spoke in a quiet whisper, looking down at her plate. “I... just think it’s the next step forward. They were impressed with my performance in the competition. It’s a *really* good position. And progress... I need to be making progress.”

I pursed my lips, and I didn’t want my voice to come out sounding pitiful, but I didn’t get everything I wanted. “Are you going to come back...?”

She winced, and that was all the answer I needed. “I don’t... know.”

“Ugh. Dammit. If you’d told me normally, I would have been happy for you. And celebrated you. And, and... and...”

“I... meant to.” She hung her head. “I was just afraid you’d... hate me for it, I guess.”

Harper was the kind of girl who always composed herself with so much strength, an unbreakable pillar. But there were the little cracks like this, where you could see through the concrete walls and saw a scared little girl who was always so afraid to let herself have anything good, posing as someone different, someone stronger, and it always gave me feelings I wasn’t prepared for when I saw it.

I looked down at my cake. “You really thought I’d hate you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe that I’d hate myself. Either way, doesn’t really matter, now that you’ve invited yourself into my personal files.”

“I didn’t check your *personal* email, just your work one.”

She rubbed her forehead. “Lovely. What a relief.”

“It *is* a relief. Now all the newsletters for sex toy boutiques you’re signed up to, I don’t see them.”

She dragged a hand over her face. “And I’m supposed to believe that when you comment on them?”

I paused. “Um. I was just making a joke. I didn’t know you actually got any.”

“Oh.”

The room fell into silence. The wind rumbled in the window frame. A furious blush spilled over Harper’s face as she looked away.

“What are you subscribed to—”

“Shh—shut up.”

“What? You can’t drop something like that and not give me the deets.”

“I wasn’t trying to drop anything!” She was blushing all the way down to her neck now, tinting around the floral tattoos she had there. She looked cute when she was like this.

“I’m gonna start guessing.”

“I’ll jump from the window.”

“Is it, like, you bought something and you got a discount for signing up—”

“*Paisley.*”

“What’d you get?”

“A wand vibrator! Shut up!”

I dropped back in my chair. “That’s it? That’s so basic. From how you were reacting, I was expecting fetish gear or something.”

She buried her face in her hands. “Oh my god. Thank you for sealing the decision. I cannot leave Bayview quickly enough.”

I sighed, taking a bite of cake and savoring the creaminess of the frosting, impossibly rich buttercream and a complex vanilla. “So,” I said finally, “you actually mean it. You’re going to leave Bayview. At the end of next month.”

She was quiet, staring down at the floor, before—small, timid—she nodded.

“Next step in your journey, huh.” I kicked at the floor, feeling petulant. “Well... congratulations, I guess, you huge

jerk. This seems like a really big deal and a special honor to get in there.”

She pursed her lips. “I... I don’t want anyone to think I’m just trying to get away or anything. I really like this place. I really like the people here. And it wasn’t easy to... decide on something like this.”

Suddenly I felt so far away, like I was looking in through the window, and I kind of just wanted to cry. I huddled into myself, and I took a long breath before I said, “If it doesn’t pan out, though, you’ll come back here, right?”

“I don’t know...” She rubbed at her arm. “Once I’ve closed down the bakery and left, I don’t think I’d have any place here coming back.”

“You shut your mouth. People would want you back. That’s final. Deal with it.”

She gave me a tired, barely-there smile. “It’s one thing to say it now...”

“I said *shut it*. Ugh. I can’t believe you would even think about implying I wouldn’t want you back. In Bayview.” I sighed hard, standing up, my head spinning a little with the hot sensation churning there. “Ugh, I’m going. I’ve had enough cake. I can’t believe I’d ever say those words.”

“Paisley—” Harper stood up with me, but I turned my back on her.

“Shush. I’m mad right now.”

“*You’re* mad, when you’re the one who was raiding my computer—”

“Yes, I am mad! I’m going to go... go... work the damn bookshop or something. Ugh! I hate you, Harper. More than anyone in the world has ever hated anyone ever, ever, ever, ever, ever!”

I shouted the words louder and louder as I stormed down the stairs and unlocked the back door, throwing one last angry *ever* up the stairs before I slammed the door shut behind me

and sank back against it, folding my arms and letting my head sink back against the door.

The night was quiet right now. Too quiet. I didn't like it. Everyone had probably partied themselves enough at the park earlier that they got tired and just wanted to go home, and now everything was empty. Like the world was holding its breath.

Timidly, I turned back and opened the door again, a nervous sensation in my stomach as I leaned inside.

"Harper?" I called. "Um... I don't hate you. Just so you know. You know that, right?"

If she could even still hear me upstairs, she didn't respond. I pursed my lips.

"I love you, like, to the moon and back. You do know that, right?"

Still no response. Ugh. Maybe I did hate her. I turned back, shutting the door behind me, and I walked feeling dizzy and vaguely sick the whole way back to my house.

Chapter 5

Harper

The morning was a dizzy haze. I blamed the lack of sleep. Arguing with Paisley had left me lying there in bed for an awfully long time, staring out the window at where I could see her house across the street, and I'd just... thought. I didn't even know what about. But all in all, it kept me up past midnight, and I got maybe four hours of sleep.

Still, it was hard to say if it was actually the lack of sleep or if that was a convenient excuse. I'd interrogate that thought never.

The morning rush was the same as ever, people coming in bright-eyed, cheerful and chattering, and people coming in looking as sleep-deprived and dead on their feet as I was. Either way, it was easy to tune out while I was here—just get into the flow, go through a list of things I knew needed doing, and find my peace in the moment.

Emberlynn came in nice and early today, which gave me information that, as always, I actively tried not to think about. She gave me an anxious smile as she set down a loaf of Italian white bread and a tray of blueberry muffins.

“What’s tonight’s dinner?” I said, bagging up her bread.

“No idea. Pais is cooking for me tonight, and she said to get Italian bread for it.”

Looked like I couldn't get far without thinking of Paisley. I should have been pissed off at her rooting through my computer. Instead, I think I was just somehow glad I didn't have to actually break the news to her—glad I didn't have to say anything difficult. I kind of wished everyone would just stumble across it.

Well, I couldn't handle that many meltdowns over it. Paisley's had been enough. Having her storming out shouting that she hated me had been a cathartic relief, something I knew

I deserved. It had been her leaning back in through the door downstairs to shout that she loved me that had hurt.

Why? I didn't know.

"She'd better be careful," I said idly, ringing her up. "There's a half teaspoon of black pepper in the bread. Might be too spicy for her to handle."

Emberlynn scratched her head. "Yeah... she said she wanted it for the spicy kick."

"Jesus. I thought I was exaggerating. Eight thirty-two."

She handed over her card, and I swiped it through, tossing the receipt. "Thanks," she said.

"So," I said. "Why the look?"

"God dammit." She hung her head. "Ugh. I'm just up in my own head again. The exact same way as before. Over the exact same situation as before. Why am I such a fucking idiot?"

I sighed. "Well... in my humble view, if we don't make fucking idiots of ourselves from time to time, we're not growing."

"Ugh. I guess. I do believe that. Just... how do I put myself in the exact same position and expect something else?"

"You don't expect something else, you expect yourself to be able to handle it differently from last time. And you will. You're better at pushing through the self-doubt now and making something with your own signature style regardless of the pressure. Want me to listen to what you've been working on?"

"No, I just want you to take away all of the problems forever. But in lieu of that, maybe. Do you want to come join us for... spicy dinner?"

Joining Paisley for anything right now was a no-go. I'd have to wait a while before I was ready to see her again. "I can't do dinner, but I could swing by after I close here and we could grab lunch together?"

“Yeah, that sounds good. Aria’s got calls at lunchtime, so we can go for noodles and I’ll bring back her favorite as takeaway for once she’s done?”

I laughed drily, shaking my head. “You two are sickeningly sweet. I love it. Yeah, that works. I’ll text you once I’m done with closing.”

“Sounds good. Thanks, Harps. As always. I’d be useless without you.”

That was really not what I wanted to hear right now. What I needed was people lining up to tell me how I contributed nothing and they didn’t want me here.

After Anders came in and got the carrot mini-cupcake for Nancy, and once we’d chatted for a bit about what he and Nancy had missed at the party, I settled into the easy, comfortable lull that always came down over the shop around the time Anders left. I cleaned the floors, restocked the shelves, and I was in the middle of working through the evening batch of breads when the doorbell rang. I finished quickly with scoring the breads and shoved them in the walk-in oven, and I washed my hands before I stepped out to the front and fumbled over my own feet at the sight of Paisley there on the other side of the counter, a pink-wrapped gift box in her hands.

“Pais?” I said. “Don’t tell me you’re trying to trade something else for a cake today.”

She stuck out her tongue. “Nah. I mooched one of Emby’s leftover cupcakes this morning. You really nailed it with the lemon.” She set the package down, sliding it across the counter to me. It wasn’t... the best-wrapped package in the world, a little crumpled in the corners and held together with too much tape. And by a little crumpled I meant a lot. But it was a cute, soft shade of pink with a thin green ribbon, and a note tied to the ribbon read *For Harper—I’m sorry for saying I hate you*. I got a lump in my throat as I took the box, my heart beating fast. Paisley was the only one who’d ever gotten me to admit pink was my favorite color.

“You got me a present?” I said, finally. “Is it a bomb?”

“Nope, just ten thousand cockroaches.”

“Coming from you, I can’t be sure if that’s true or not...”

She waved me off. “Oh my god, you dumbass, just open it. It’s not actually bombs or cockroaches. It’s a going-away gift.”

Suddenly I wanted nothing to do with the gift. It hurt like a knife to the chest, and I prayed she didn’t notice the way my hands clenched tighter on the box.

“I don’t want you leaving without at least knowing first that you’re loved by—”

“I can’t accept it,” I sighed. Paisley looked like I’d just murdered her baby in front of her.

“*What?* Oh my god. You can’t *not accept* a gift from Paisley Macleod. Look how pretty I am today!”

She looked the exact same as always. In fact—she was wearing the same sweater as last night. Or maybe she had multiples of it.

Still, I sighed, setting the box down.

“I don’t need pity and sweet gestures and a bunch of people coming around telling me *oh we’re going to miss you so much*. That’s why I was too afraid to tell people. I can’t... I’m not going to play this game.”

Paisley scowled. I pushed the box into her hands, and wordlessly, she turned on her feet, storming back towards the door. My stomach churned with a sick sensation, regretting it instantly, but she stopped at the door, and—I blinked fast when she locked it, flipped the OPEN sign to CLOSED, and turned off the lights. Marching back towards me with grim perseverance, she held out the box.

“Try again,” she said.

“Did you just close my bakery down to do this?”

She gestured to the bakery. “What does it look like? Are you taking it or what?”

I folded my arms. I'd just regretted doing this, but a stubborn streak told me not to give in.

But Paisley planted her hands on the counter, and she leaned towards me, and my stomach dropped when she spoke in a low murmur, meeting my eyes.

“Uncross your arms.”

I—wasn't emotionally prepared for this. I uncrossed them purely by reflex, my face burning. Paisley nodded.

“Good. Put your hands out, Harper.”

I put my hands out. I looked at them like they were betraying me. I felt like my whole body burned with embarrassment. Just because she was using the voice she used when we'd had sex and she'd told me what to do—

“Mm-hm. Just like that. Turn your palms up.”

I turned my palms up. I genuinely didn't even think about it. She set the box down on my hands, and she leaned in closer, her gaze locked on mine. I didn't want to know how much I was blushing right now.

“Right hand, up. On the ribbon. Hold the loose strand.”

“I... told you I can't accept it,” I murmured weakly, but I took the loose strand of ribbon. The double entendre of unfastening it so the dressing could fall away wasn't lost on me.

“Now pull on it.”

I pulled the ribbon. My breath hitched in my throat as it pulled against a snag, straining against the loose knot, tension building through my body as it drew tighter—and then I gasped, a small one but still an embarrassing one, when it gave, the ribbon coming undone and falling limp over my hand. My heart was racing. Over opening a present? *Really?*

Paisley smiled wider, and she reached up, and she took her glasses off. My head went fuzzy. With all the associations, and the fact that she'd taken her glasses off in the boat when we'd...

“You know what to do,” she whispered. I jerked involuntarily, every part of me embarrassingly flush with self-awareness, but I moved my hands to tear the wrapping, peeling strips away until it came down to a white gift box with a pale pink trim around the edges.

Paisley smiled, a glint in her eyes.

“Good,” she said, leaning back again, putting her glasses back on, breaking the spell. I jerked back to reality, my hands still shaking, as she gestured to the box. “C’mon, the gift is inside.”

I was going to—going to have a fucking heart attack and die. I burned with embarrassment, frustrated with myself to the point where I thought I’d die for being affected like that. “All right, all right,” I muttered, looking down at the box, forcing myself not to look at Paisley. “If you’re going to get pushy.”

She laughed. “You like when I do.”

Dammit. I did need to leave Bayview. With shaking hands, I lifted up the box lid, and I stopped, frowning at the inside.

A picture frame. It was a gorgeous frame, clearly from Emory’s shop, hand-carved wood with a quick ocean view painted into the corner along with the word *Bayview*, but... the frame was empty.

“Pais, I think you forgot the photo.”

“What?” She went wide-eyed, looking at it. “Oh, crap. Oh, god. What did I do with it?”

I gave her a deadpan look. After a second, she broke into her signature smile.

“Nah, I’m kidding. That was on purpose.”

“Sure.”

“I mean it. Are you ready for my brilliant idea?”

“No, it’s too brilliant for me to withstand. I’d better put it back and just open the shop again.”

She leaned over the counter, eyes sparkling. “We’re gonna take a picture for it.”

“You’re outsourcing the labor of making the gift to me?”

“Oh my god, it’s like you’re trying to be obtuse. I don’t know what I did to deserve this.” She let out a long, melodramatic sigh. “How’s this? Before you leave Bayview, one last tour of it. We go experience everything Bayview, and you’re going to have a great time so you don’t have to look back and worry about anything you missed out on doing. And we’ll take pictures, and you can put your favorite one in the frame to remember.”

I let out a heavy sigh, dropping the frame back onto the tissue paper in the box. Paisley was anything but conventional, but... she did give the best gifts. And this, turned out, was her outdoing herself. In a way that made me want to push her over, run away, hide myself away in my bedroom, and never see anyone again.

I didn’t deserve this. But I couldn’t bring that up without getting an earful from her.

“Is this *tour* going to be you sending me to do errands for you?” I said, finally. She snorted.

“C’mon. Cynicism isn’t a good look for someone that pretty. You’re going to decide what’s on the tour.”

“Really.” I tried to ignore the part about her calling me pretty. I didn’t know how to engage with it right now. “So I’m also the tour guide for my own tour.”

“Maybe less a tour and more, like... a bucket list.” She grinned. “Bayview bucket list. Everything you’ve ever wanted to do here. And I’m gonna spoil the hell out of you by taking you to do everything. What do you say? And your only option is yes, because it’s Paisley asking, so keep that in mind.”

“Bayview bucket list.” I rubbed my forehead. “How tacky is that?”

She put her hands on her hips. “You take that back right now, or I will start screaming as loud as I possibly can until you do.”

“Okay! Okay. I take it back. Oh my god.” I sank against the wall behind the counter, looking down at the frame.

“So? We’ll meet up tomorrow morning, and we’ll figure out what’s on your bucket list.”

I glowered. “I work in the morning, Paisley. Running the shop. I work literally every morning.”

“Not if you close tomorrow, you won’t.” She winked. “C’mon. You deserve a day off. Especially if you’re getting ready to leave, better wean everyone off this place.”

The more she talked about it, the realer it felt, and I wasn’t really... emotionally ready for that. I looked out the window. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Well, too late. I already put word out that you’re going to be closed tomorrow.”

I paused. “You did what?”

She puffed out her chest. “I’m the queen of gossip, you know. I want something to get everywhere in town, I can do it just like that, bam! Paisley superpowers. So, deal with it. You’re mine tomorrow morning.”

I felt myself flush. *Dammit*. Was I that easy? All she had to do was word something like that?

No—it was obviously a lot more than that. But that explanation was easier to accept.

“I don’t know why I ever try saying no to you,” I sighed, hard. “Well, I *guess* if nobody’s coming here tomorrow anyway—”

“Great!” She reached across and pulled me into an awkward over-the-counter hug, squeezing her face into my shoulder, the frame of her glasses pressing into my collar. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then. Oh my god, this is going to be great. I’m such a genius.”

“You’re certainly very... something.”

“Yep! A genius.” She pulled away, beaming, and she winked before she spun on her heel. “I’ll open the shop again

on my way out! I'll see you tomorrow, Harps. Love you.”

It really was pointless to try resisting her in anything. I sank against the counter, looking down at the empty photo frame in the box, staring up at me.

Chapter 6

Paisley

I was kind of hoping I'd be able to get back to my place and then just crash—like, fall face-first into my bed and blare some music and let myself be a moody mess—but there was a clattering noise in the kitchen, music playing. I rounded the corner into the kitchen, primed for revenge.

“*Emberlynn*. I told you I'd be cooking—” I stopped, scrunching up my face at the sight of Kay there, looking up from where she was, by all appearances, serving up strawberries and cream. “You're not *Emberlynn*.”

She beamed. “I'm not! It's true.”

I guess I could have expected this. It was definitely J-Pop she was blaring from her phone, the case decked out in glittery pastels and anime character stickers. That wasn't *Emberlynn's* usual music taste. But I put my hands on my hips, scowling. “Who do you think you are, just barging into someone's house without asking?”

She scratched her head. “*Emberlynn* saw me waiting at your door and said I could just go in...”

“This is literally worse than murder.”

“Don't you do this to everyone basically all the time?”

“*Yes*. But that's different. I'm *Paisley*. You're not. Ugh.” I paused. “Are you making me food?”

She perked up. “Strawberries and cream! I thought it could be nice. I brought some tea *Gwen* said I could share with you. She said the Emperor's Clouds green tea would be a perfect match.”

“I guess I can forgive you, if you brought food.”

She laughed. “Wait until we've sat down to talk about what we said yesterday, before you decide whether you've forgiven me.”

Oh, god. I'd forgotten. I pursed my lips. "Right..."

She gave me an awkward laugh. "You forgot."

"No!"

"Yes?"

"Yes." I slumped. "Ugh. Fine. I'll put the water on for the tea."

"Oh—heat it to one-sixty-two, okay?"

"You think I have a kettle that precise? It's only because of Emberlynn that I don't just put a glass of water in the oven and call it a day."

But still, the food was delicious, at least. I was pouting and grouchy the whole time I ate it, but it was delicious, and the tea worked nicely with it, even if I swear it just tasted like tea and there was nothing that special about it. I only got halfway through the food, though, before Kay gave me an awkward look over the pile of stuff on my table, and she said, "So... what's eating you?"

"I wish something would eat me. A giant snapping turtle made of lightning that descends from the heavens to snap me up in its jaws and fly into the sun."

"Well, barring that happening, do you want to tell me what's on your mind? You look like you're going through it."

I slumped over the table. "Nah. It's because of something that someone's keeping a secret, and I don't spill secrets."

"Aren't you the biggest gossip in town...?"

"There's *gossip* and then there's *secrets*. And it's important to know where the line is. I share gossip. I do not share secrets. God, though, do I ever share gossip."

She settled back in the chair, cupping her tea in both hands. "Is it something to do with Harper?"

"No! It's nothing to do with her. Oh my god, stop bringing her up. I swear, it's nothing to do with her."

She sipped slowly at her tea, one long sip with her eyes fixed on me before she set it down. “Um... that was the only time I asked.”

I looked away sharply. “Well, then you’ve been wrong one hundred percent of the time. You’d better not do it again, or it’ll be two hundred percent.”

“That is not how percentages work. So...” She leaned forwards, folding her arms on the table. “Did something happen to her? Is she okay?”

“Ugh. No. She’s fine. Unfortunately.”

“Hmm.” She chewed her lip. “A crush? Are you into her?”

I hunched into myself, shoving my hands into my pockets, looking at my tea. “Oh my god. It’s not that.”

“You aren’t looking directly at me, though.”

I forced myself to look at her. Somehow, though, my gaze broke, roaming to the shelf of arts and crafts supplies behind her. “I am,” I said.

“You are very much lying.”

I forced myself to look at her again. I felt like throwing something when I found my gaze roamed again, settling on the door out to the back garden. “I’m not lying.”

“So... it is a crush.”

“Ugh.” I collapsed on the table, shoving the food away, and I raked my fingers through my hair. “I don’t *know*. What does a crush feel like?”

“Mm...” She traced shapes on the table, casting her eyes to the sky. “You think about them all the time? You catch yourself daydreaming about them? You want to be close to them, touch them, kiss them?”

“It isn’t that...”

“Is it not?”

I mumbled something even I didn't know what. My face prickled.

"Um... I'm curious," she said. "Have you ever really dated anybody? I've never heard about you being with anyone."

"I dunno."

"You *don't know*? If you've dated?"

"Ugh. I guess I haven't." I pushed back from the table, turning to the door, and I sank forwards, resting my elbows on my knees. "I don't know. It just doesn't feel right. Leave me alone. I'm waiting for the snapping turtle."

She moved her chair over next to mine, sitting by me and watching clouds roll by. "What if," she started, and I shook my head.

"No. Definitely not."

She ignored me. "What if you like Harper and so you haven't been interested in anyone else?"

I looked away, hunching tighter in on myself. "It isn't that either."

"Then what is it?"

I sighed, and I was quiet for a long time. Eventually, my voice came out in a mumble. "Like I said. It just doesn't feel right."

"Why not?"

"Dating is like—it's for other people."

"What kind of other people?"

"Um... datey people. I dunno."

"Who are people you can see dating?"

I kicked at the floor. "Emberlynn and my lousy sister, for one. You and Gwen. Annabel, for sure. Obviously her girlfriend too. Probably the rest of her team, too. Sam and Jenna, and Charlie, and..."

"Is this just everyone but you?"

“Oh.” I frowned. “Oh, wow. I guess it is.”

She reached back and picked up her tea, cradling it in both hands, staring out the glass door for a while before she said, “Okay, let’s say... Annabel. You said *for sure* about her, so I assume she’s very datey. What makes her different from you?”

“Just... like...” I gestured. “You know. It’s obvious. You know the difference.”

“Red hair?”

“Ugh, you’re impossible. I’m going to hit my head on the wall until I die.”

“I really don’t know the difference,” she said. I sighed, hard, a pointed sigh before I realized I didn’t know what it was pointed at. I looked back down.

“Um...” I shifted in my chair. “I feel like I’m a little weird.”

She paused. “Is... that it?”

“Like I said, do not tell anybody.”

“I think everybody knows that already...”

“You’re the worst.” I hugged myself. “I mean, like... like...” I frowned. “Maybe I don’t know what I mean. But you know what I mean, right? I’m not pretty and cool and stylish and talented and smart and all these other things. I’m just... me. Just Paisley.”

She glanced sidelong at me. “You’re too... insecure to date people?”

“When you put it like that, it makes me sound like a loser. I just... I’m not the dating type. End of story. Fin. Kaput.”

“I’m not sure you know what *kaput* means.” She shook her head. “That’s nothing to be ashamed of, though. We all have insecurities. And I know they can really get in the way when we’re dating. Like... trust me when I say I know that

very well. My insecurities almost lost me everything with Gwen.”

“Yeah, but, like... at least you have something that makes you interesting. Ugh. Forget it. I hate this conversation. I’m going to go climb into a hole and fill it back up behind me.”

“Does Emberlynn know you feel this way? She’s your best friend, right?”

I was of half a mind to just walk out the door and keep walking until I drowned in the ocean. Kay wouldn’t stop coming with the hits. I ducked my head. “I mean, ostensibly,” I mumbled.

“Did something happen?”

“No. Yeah. I guess. Just... you know. She’s dating my sister.” I shrugged, picking at my fingernails. “And I don’t have a problem with that. Not anymore, at least. I was a little brat about it for a while, but I don’t have a problem anymore. Just that she’s... well. Someone else is more important in her life now.”

She pursed her lips, a sad little pout. “She shouldn’t have to make you feel less important just to be with someone. A relationship doesn’t mean sacrificing your friendships.”

“I know. And it’s my problem. I guess it’s not that Aria is *more* important, just that she’s... just as important, in a different way. So now someone else has equal billing as me. And I’m not mature enough to handle that.”

She sighed sadly. “I’m sorry things are making you feel that way.”

I kicked at the floor. “It just feels harder to open up to her about as much. And we still spend all our time together, but it feels like there’s some kind of wall forming there, building up slowly, and it makes me want to scream until my lungs pop out like a party blower.”

“Ew.”

I sighed, standing up. My feet carried me outside, into the little lot behind the house, and I sat down on the stoop. Kay sat down next to me, and I guess at this point I kind of just accepted that I'd have to have this conversation with her.

"It sucks when I step back and realize I don't have any identity outside of her," I said. "I feel like I used to be all fun and happy and living my best life as me around everybody in town. And then Emberlynn moved into town and I was, like, literally obsessed, and I clung onto her, and it was even better. But now that she's finding her own life outside of me, I'm kind of realizing that *I* don't have my own life outside of *her*. I'm just a weirdo who looks like a goblin and breeds lizards."

"I think you look cute."

"Ugh. Don't patronize me. If I could turn into King Kong right now and smash you into a pulp, I would."

She smiled sweetly at me. "Well, as far as I know, you can't, so I'm willing to take that risk. I *do* think you look cute. I like your hair, and you have pretty eyes."

"I look like a soulless monster rolled in dog hair and lint."

"Okay, now I think you're exaggerating. Still, if you don't like the way you come across, how you look and act and everything..." She shrugged, resting back against the door and looking up to the sky. Dark clouds formed on the horizon, and the winds whipping up said rain was coming. Kay breathed in deep before she looked at me. "I think it's important to love ourselves. And sometimes that takes the form of accepting things about ourselves and learning to love them as they are, and sometimes I think that takes the form of finding the courage to change things about ourselves."

"Ugh, you're telling me to get better. I would, but that's, like... work. And, ugh, pass."

"It's not work if it's fun."

I chewed my cheek. I believed that, but I still wanted to be difficult. Partly because this whole thing was way too close to home and partly just because being difficult was, like, my

thing. “It’s work if it needs me to get out of bed or move or do anything at all.”

“Mm-hm.” She kicked her feet up, looking down at her rainbow socks. “What do you think the ideal form of you is like?”

“Ugh. Cooler and more interesting.”

“More interesting than the person who runs a lizard breeding camp in her spare bedroom?” She laughed. I scowled.

“Who even spilled the deets about the Ultimate Lizard? That was supposed to be a top-secret ultra-confidential high-security containment situation only verified top-clearance secure intel could pick up.”

“Emberlynn told me.”

“Damn.” I slumped back against the door. “For real, though, I don’t know. And I think it’d be too weird to try doing anything about it.”

“How come?”

“Because—this is how I *am*. Like, everybody knows me. I just have my reputation, you know? And people get weird if you go back on your reputation.”

“Mm... no kidding.” She dropped her gaze to the ground. “I get that. Totally.”

“So you admit all I can do is be a weird loser for the rest of eternity.”

“That’s a really remarkable leap. I don’t think that, actually, but I’m really impressed by the leap, so I have to give credit where it’s due.” She smiled softly at me. “I feel like you should probably talk to Emberlynn, you know? Like... she gets you in a way nobody else does.”

“Ugh, that’s the *problem*. She’s all caught up in how she *thinks* I should be. She’s got years of me already catalogued in her mind, and plus, she’s a permanent fixture now, too, which means if I make any weird random changes then it’s going to be something stuck there in our memory forever, and oh my

god Kay you're a genius," I blurted, standing up, a hot rush in my head all of a sudden. She stood up with me, blinking fast.

"I—what?"

"Oh my god, you're *so* right. You are just like Benjamin Franklin because you are *on the money*."

"Th-thank you?"

I clapped my hands together, spinning on my heel, and I threw open the door back into the house. "Okay, great talk, Kay! I gotta go. I've got stuff to do. Places to do. People to do. Ew. Never mind that last part. I'm gonna run."

"Paisley—your food!"

I paused next to the table and scraped the last third of my strawberries and cream into my mouth, and I slammed the tea back before I took off.

Chapter 7

Harper

The noodles were great. Lance, a man with the world's most intense expression and a glass eye, cooked them to exacting perfection in the open kitchen every time, that sterling-silver masculine glare of his lit in stark contrast by licking flames, and whenever I saw him in the kitchen I knew the noodles were going to be good. He didn't disappoint.

Emberlynn had clearly been looking for an outlet—she dumped topics on me for about thirty solid minutes without me getting a word in, not that I could have if I wanted to, knowing nothing about everything she was saying. Mixer standards and licensing for samples and an argument about vocal chops, inane crossfade presets, and an irrational amount of anger at Ableton—like a good friend, I listened along, nodding, agreeing with whatever the hell she was talking about, and she looked like she could breathe again once we got to the end of her rant.

“I'm so sorry, I got so carried away,” she laughed nervously. “Do you want to listen to what I have so far? It's hot garbage, but at least there might be a line in there somewhere.”

“Hit me.”

It wasn't hot garbage at all, no surprise Emberlynn was underselling herself. Unlike last time she'd taken a gig with this label, she hadn't lost herself—her style was still clearly there, a clean and classic beat that was danceable through and through, even if it was still basic and underworked. Still, she looked like she was confessing to a murder. Poor girl was up in her head something major.

“Before I tell you what I think,” I said, “I'm curious what you think.”

“I don’t *know*. Maybe it’s brilliant, probably it’s all trash.”

“If you had to guess what I was going to say about it...”

“You *kind of like it, in a way?*”

I smiled wryly. “Much more enthusiastic than that. I think it’s good. I think you’re doubting yourself too much.”

“Me?” Emberlynn raked her hand back through her hair. “I would never.”

“Honestly, just keep steady. Keep going at it like this, and you’ll have it in the bag.”

“Mm. If you say so.” Her expression was twisted up in self-doubt as she turned back to her noodles, poking at the thick-cut strips of beef tongue on top, scallions drifting away on the soup surface. Behind her, the door chimed open as Charlie and her friend from the school came in, chattering away in that way that said they must have had a day off today because they were probably both a drink or two in. It was an odd ache in my stomach thinking how I’d end up in a place where I wouldn’t know all these things about everyone around me.

I pulled my focus back to Emberlynn, and I put a hand on her arm. “You don’t have to do it all right now,” I said. “You’re already making a ton of progress for how much time you have left. Maybe take a break.”

Emberlynn pouted. “I don’t do breaks.”

“You could stand to learn from Paisley. The girl’s never worked hard a day in her life.”

That got a grin out of her. “Eh... I think it’s nice the way we contrast each other.”

I pursed my lips. “You contrast each other plenty in how clean your houses are. You don’t need to contrast by beating yourself up too.”

Emberlynn paused, looking down at her soup again. “Hey, this is random, but... how close are you with Pais,

anyway? I feel like you kinda drop off the radar in the winter, but she was still talking about going to harass you.”

I kept my expression impassive as I drank my tea, setting it down gently. “I can’t shake her. She keeps climbing the tree behind the house and coming in through my roof. She basically kept breaking into my house all winter, even when I was trying to keep to myself.”

She hung her head. “Why am I not surprised... should I buy you a padlock?”

Dammit, I could have bought myself a padlock. Mister Hartley at the hardware store treated me like a spoiled daughter of his and probably would have *accidentally* forgotten to charge me if I went in to pick one up. And I wasn’t going to think about why I hadn’t just done it already. “I doubt it would stop her,” I settled on saying.

“Hm.”

She looked like there was something she was weighing whether or not to say, and I didn’t want to hear it. The less said about me and Paisley, the better. I cut in with, “So, any reason you still look uncertain about the song?”

She grimaced. “Just... it’s nothing.”

“Ah. Sure is a lot of feelings for nothing.”

“Yeah...” She buried her face in the noodles, picking up the bowl and slurping at the broth. “You’re telling me,” she said finally, setting the bowl back down, still avoiding my gaze.

“Everything okay with you and Ar?”

“Yeah. Just... worried about myself, I guess,” she mumbled, fussing with her chopsticks. “Her newest launch didn’t go as well as it could have, but she’s been picking it up like there was never a problem to begin with. She’s *way* too good at everything. And sometimes I...” She shrugged, shrinking further into herself. “I worry if I’m... measuring up.”

I pursed my lips, studying her. “Has Aria said anything to make you feel like you aren’t?”

“Never. She wouldn’t dream of it.” She laughed drily. “She acts like I’m the impressive one...”

“I think you *are* plenty impressive. You’ve come a long way in your music.”

She winced. “Yeah...?”

“Yeah. I mean it. It’s been a long, bumpy road, but you’ve overcome a hell of a lot of stuff.”

“And gone back to the same label that screwed me over the worst,” she sighed, looking down.

“I think it’s a sign you’ve got guts. And strength of will. So—all things considered, you’re doing well. Aria’s doing really well, too, but... all that money mostly comes from her getting obscenely lucky with her first launch. Strip that part out, and I’d say you two are doing equally well.”

“Mm. Maybe.” She scratched her neck. “I feel like she’s still miles ahead of me even then, but... she’d probably say the same thing about me.”

“Exactly. You can’t trust your brain. Getting an outside opinion was the right move.” I paused. “On that note—have you talked to Paisley about this?”

“Oh, um... nah. Not really.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Sore subject? Everything okay between you two?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” She shifted. “I don’t know. It’s kind of felt... different ever since Ar and I came back to Bayview. Like Paisley’s not quite... a hundred percent herself. Or maybe just that our relationship isn’t a hundred percent right. I don’t know what it is, but it feels kind of like we’re both...” She shrugged, chewing her lip. “Putting on a performance with each other, maybe. I don’t know. I’m whining a lot.”

“I asked. You’re certainly allowed to share.” I finished my soup, setting the bowl down with a solid *thump*. “Have you talked to her about it?”

She sighed. “What would I say?”

“I mean, you could try everything you just told me, but maybe that’s a batshit idea.”

“It’d be awkward.” She knocked back the rest of her soup, too, setting it down gently before she pushed her chair back, signaling to Lance. He nodded, going back to the range—starting the takeout order for Aria. Emberlynn looked back at me, and she let out a sigh. “I guess that’s all there is to it, huh? Scared of making things awkward and weird.”

I turned to the window, watching the old birch tree planted in front of the shop bending in a heavy wind, a paper napkin whipping from a patio table and across the redbrick plaza. “I could talk to her about it instead, if you want,” I said airily. Emberlynn made a noise somewhere in her throat I don’t think she meant to make.

“Um—no thanks. I mean, I appreciate it, but I don’t want to look like that much of a loser, like I have to get someone else to talk to her for me about how I’m awkward.”

I put my hands up. “Hey, sometimes it’s just easier to have someone else step in and handle things. There’s no shame in it unless you want to make things harder for yourself on purpose.”

“Well, maybe I do.”

“You? Shocking.”

“I know. I know.” She stood up slowly, picking up her bag and pitching her phone and headphones back inside. She avoided my gaze as I spoke. “I just... I need to handle it myself. But it’s a good thing we had this conversation. Kicking my butt to make sure I actually do talk to her about it instead of putting it off.”

I stood up with her, my legs aching. I wasn’t sure why the bakery shift today had taken it out of me, when I’d done the same thing almost every day for years now. Maybe it was just my body breaking down a little knowing it finally had a rest day tomorrow.

I’d die before I admitted I was grateful for it, though.

“Heading out now?”

“Mm. I think I feel better about continuing the piece now. Thanks for, you know, hearing me out.”

“If you want to pay me back, you can buy a cake.”

“Yeah, trust me, I know,” she laughed, swatting lightly at my shoulder. “Thanks, Harps. Walking back with me?”

I looked out the window. “I’m gonna take the scenic way back. I could use a walk in nature right now.”

She raised her eyebrows at me. “Something on your mind?”

“Not even sure,” I lied. “Just feeling weird. Hoping maybe a walk in the park will help.”

“Is that why you’re closing tomorrow?”

Paisley had even gotten Emberlynn to believe it. Emberlynn should have known better than to believe anything Paisley was saying. I could have just told her myself—that it was all Paisley’s idea and that she was insisting I go do stuff with her tomorrow instead—but I wasn’t ready for the conversations that might have entailed. “Yeah, I guess,” I said. “Just feeling... contemplative. I’m sure I’ll be fine. Still just bouncing back from seasonal depression, I’m sure.”

“I know it’s tough. Let me know if there’s anything I can do, okay?”

It wouldn’t really be fair for someone like me to keep asking for things from other people, especially if I was going to abandon everyone before too long. But I wasn’t going to say that. It would probably cause a fuss—Emberlynn trying to tell me I *did* deserve nice things, or something like that. I smiled politely. “This was helpful. Thanks, Emby.”

She glowered. “If it was helpful, you could at least try saying my name right.”

“Thanks, Emberlynn Morgan Wood.”

“You’re impossible,” she laughed, taking a step back. “Well—catch you later?”

“Sounds good. Have fun with Paisley at dinner.”

“Will do. Thanks.”

I pulled my jacket back on as I pushed out through the old black wood door, coming into the blustery weather, wind throwing my hair around my head, and I let my feet carry me toward the park.

There were reasons I didn't get close to people. I'd been... letting myself forget them. But with a move, a new life, I could try again. Do better this time. And not let anybody help me—with anything.

If I was going to be Harper, I kind of had to.



I woke up with a groggy stir, feeling something moving. I waved a hand around in front of me, swatting away whatever was moving, and I jolted to instant wakefulness when I found Paisley on top of me. And *swatting* had led to my hand on her boob.

“Someone's energetic,” Paisley said, looking down at my hand groping her. I jerked myself back, sitting up in bed so sharply I hit my head on the headboard. My face burned, even though my body and my chest ached badly for...

“Jesus Christ, what are you doing here?”

“Uh, duh. I told you I'd come see you in the morning.” She gestured to the windows on the side of the room, thin curtains in pale pink letting in crisp light from a clear blue sky. I hadn't slept in past sunrise in ages. What happened to me? “And voilà,” she said. “Morning.”

I pursed my lips. “A normal human being would come knock on my front door.”

She laughed. “Since when was I a normal human being, Harps?”

“I'm not wearing pants.”

“That’s okay. You have nice legs.”

I was going to throw her off the bed. I hugged the blanket tighter to my chest. “Oh my god. Go outside and wait for me to join you. Please just do one thing normally.”

She grinned. “What do you want for breakfast?”

“Peace. Solitude.”

She planted her hands on either side of my shoulders and leaned down towards me, and my head went racing, wheeling off into oblivion. Wild hazel eyes, so alive, stared straight into me, and up this close, pinning me to the bed, I was...

“Cinnamon-honey brioche,” she said. “With orange-flower honey butter on top. And a black Colombian coffee. Light roast. Does that sound good?”

“I—ugh. Sure, I guess. Did you bring me that?”

She beamed wider. “*Sure, I guess* isn’t the right answer. Try *yes ma’am*.”

I felt a flush of self-consciousness burning in my face, but—I found I couldn’t *not* do it when Paisley told me to like that. I had no idea what the fuck was wrong with me, but I heard myself say it, softly, numbly—obediently. “I—yes, ma’am.”

Her eyes flashed with something I couldn’t read. I burned, looking away.

“I did what you asked. Now get off of me.”

“You know how to make a girl happy.” She turned and rolled off the bed, freeing me, and I told myself I didn’t want her on top of me again. “Okay, if I’m being honest, it’s your own cinnamon-honey brioche, but I brought it up from the bakery and heated it up. Now, come join me for breakfast.”

She wrenched the blanket off me, and I fumbled grabbing for it again, settling for just hugging my knees into my chest when she flung the blanket to the floor.

“*Paisley*. Let me put on some damn pants.”

She blinked. “I forgot you said you weren’t wearing pants.” And then, openly, nakedly, she straight-up checked me out—looking over my legs and my pink underwear with an appreciative expression—before she turned on her heel and headed back for the door. “I’ll put on some jamming tunes for breakfast while I wait, if you insist on wearing pants.”

Well... I kind of didn’t. Frustratingly, what I really wanted was to strip naked and have Paisley look at me like that all over, tell me what to do. Maybe just one more time before I left...?

Dammit. I kicked myself mentally and stood up, face burning as I got dressed.

Being in love was completely off-limits for me. And so was sex.

Even if I’d gone there with her twice already. Third time was, in fact, not the charm.

Chapter 8

Paisley

Harper wouldn't look at me when she came out of the bedroom and joined me in the kitchen, but I knew she would sneak a glance at me anyway. I was too attractive not to.

Well, at the very least, I wanted to be. Maybe it was just me covering up my insecurities by joking about them, but did we really think Paisley of all people would do that?

Anyway, Harper was wearing pants now, which was kind of a shame. She slept in some cute panties.

"Seriously," she mumbled, sinking down at the table where I'd set up the fanciest breakfast spread I could, "would it kill you to not break into my house for one day?"

"I mean, if it's going to kill anyone, it'd be me." I turned the music volume down a tick and sat down with her, picking up a piece of the brioche and biting into cinnamon-honey heaven, sweet and sharp flavors rolling around in my mouth. I sighed happily. "God, it's so good I want to scream. I don't know where I'm going to find brioche like it once you're..." I swallowed the bread, a nervous sensation suddenly in my chest. "You know, once you bail."

Harper looked away. "And that's why you decided to break into my house to steal some?"

"C'mon. You can say thank you. Judging by you sleeping until almost seven, you really needed this day off."

She was quiet for a while, picking at her brioche, taking a long sip of coffee, before she muttered, not looking directly at me, "I honestly really did. So... thanks."

Sincerity gave me a nervous rush in my chest that I tried to push down. I leaned forward, pushing my food away. "Okay, so I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Oh, god."

“Jeez, try not to be so excited. It’s your favorite person ever, Paisley, suggesting it.”

She rubbed her forehead. “I thought it was me deciding what we were doing on this... bucket-list tour?”

“Yeah, it is. But this isn’t about that. This is about *my* bucket list. Now *I’m* the one taking the bucket.”

“Taking the...” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “I’m not even sure what figure of speech you’re confusing it with.”

She was so cute when she scrunched up her nose like that. I was going to miss getting that kind of reaction from her. I took a long breath, pushing down the racing of my heart, and I found I... couldn’t really say what came next.

Oh, god. I didn’t recognize myself not being able to say something. I was Paisley Macleod, human whirlwind. But I was... um, nervous. I squeezed my hands together and tried to let out the anxiety, but it didn’t go anywhere. I wanted to kick myself.

Harper gave me an odd look, her eyebrows raised. “Er... Pais? Are you okay?”

“Um. Yeah! I’m good.”

Concern flashed over her eyes, which was the most awkward possibility in an already awkward situation. She shifted closer to me. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s—nothing.” I took a huge bite of brioche, and I let a breath out slowly.

Dammit. I was scared.

“Pais?”

I sat up with such a jerk I banged my knees on the table. Harper jumped. I pushed the words out of my mouth in a tumble. “Help me out with my identity crisis.”

“Er—I beg your pardon?”

“You’re leaving, so it only makes sense.”

She stared at me. “I’m... not actually sure anything you’re saying makes sense.”

“Oh my god, it’s like you’re trying to give me a hernia.” I threw my hands up. “An identity crisis! You know what that is.”

“I *do*, but—in the first place, since when were you having an identity crisis?”

I collapsed against the table. With the words out there now, it was easier to speak, easier to let it out, like a wall had broken. “I don’t really know,” I mumbled. “A while, I think? Maybe like... when Aria first came to visit.”

She paused. “I can’t tell if you’re actually having a heart-to-heart or if this is a weird prank.”

I scrunched up my face. “It’s a heart-to-heart, Harper. Good lord.”

“Okay. Okay. I’m sorry.” She put her hands up. “I’m not typically expecting that kind of thing from you.”

“As if you ever know what to expect from me?”

“Yeah—touché, but still.”

I sighed, looking out the window at clear blue skies, the morning sunlight still a pale gold. I wasn’t a morning person by any stretch of the imagination, but even I had to admit Bayview was pretty in the mornings.

“So...” Harper started, speaking carefully. “What kind of identity crisis is this? And how does me leaving play into it?”

I took a bite of brioche, chewing slowly, before I answered. “I’m scared.”

“Scared of what?”

“Of... uh... trying.”

She paused, studying me. “Trying... what?”

“*Trying*. In general.” I shrugged, turning back to her. “Of looking like I care about things. I dunno. I was talking to Kay about it yesterday, since she grilled me and wouldn’t let me

escape. I'm tired of just being... you know, a weird little gremlin thing who vaguely annoys people."

She raised her eyebrows high, but she didn't say anything. I pouted.

"You can say it."

She didn't say what I'd expected. "You don't think people like you that way?"

"Uh—well." I scrunched up my nose, cupping my coffee and breathing it in. "I don't think it's about that, anyway. Just..."

She relaxed. "You want to... reinvent yourself. But you're too afraid of how people will react... if they see you, what, trying to change things?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

She looked down, wincing lightly. "I get that. Really, I do."

"Please. You're perfect. What would you have to change?"

She rolled her eyes, but she wouldn't look directly at me. "I'm sure Emberlynn would say you're perfect exactly as you are."

"And you *wouldn't*?"

"Come to think of it, why aren't you talking to her about this instead? Isn't she your ride-or-die?"

"Yeah..." I looked down. "But that's kind of the problem. We're stuck with each other. If I do something embarrassing, then I have to live with her knowing all about it forever. But if I embarrass myself in front of *you*, well, you're leaving."

"Oh." She relaxed, looking at me with a small, dry smile. "I think I get it now."

I tried to push out a big grin like usual, but it faltered a little. "By the way, if you tell anyone about this, I'll kill you."

She frowned. "I would never. I'm not about to betray your confidence. Even if you are breaking into my house to read my emails off my own computer."

"Okay, that was probably a bit much on my part," I admitted. "So if I forgive you for not telling me that you're leaving, will you forgive me for that?"

"Ugh. Sure. Call it a deal."

"You are the *best*, Harps, and I adore you," I said, scooching my chair over next to her and squishing her in a hug. She grunted, but she begrudgingly put a hand on my back.

"So what are you even going to do, anyway?" she said, and I buried my face in her collar, still flushed with self-consciousness.

"Um... I dunno. What do you think I should do?"

"I really can't be the one to tell you, Pais."

"How can I be hotter?"

She made a sound that could probably pass for a duck call in a hydraulic press, somewhere in the back of her throat. "So... that's your goal? To be hot?"

I pushed myself back from her, standing up, and I thrust my chest out. "Uh, duh. Look at these good looks. You think I'm going to let them go to waste?"

She didn't look at me, the bastard. She focused on taking a small, careful bite of her brioche. "I think... you kind of have to decide for yourself what being attractive looks like."

"That's not an *answer*. Oh my god, I'm going to push you out the window."

She gave me a look. "Is it not? Have you never seen anyone who other people think is attractive and you can't see anything in them?"

I wrinkled my nose. "I mean, okay, I guess."

"Tell you what." She pulled up her phone, and she tapped at it for a bit before she handed it over open to a

Pinterest search filled with stylish models. “Take this—”

“You have the Pinterest app on your phone? What are you, a sixty-year-old homemaking Christian woman?”

“I’m a baker,” she deadpanned. “Cake designs. They’re literally everywhere there. Anyway, take the damn phone and tell me some things you think look good, and we’ll go from there.”

I paused, taking the phone, a nervous sensation in my chest. I looked between it and Harper, pausing, and she narrowed her eyes.

“It’s weird when you have something on your mind and you’re not blurting it out.”

“Um... you don’t think this is weird or anything?”

She sighed, turning away. “Sometimes you want to reinvent yourself. I get it. No shame in that.”

“Have you ever done it?”

She scratched her head. “Yeah, I was a pretty gloomy kid. Decided to start caring about food and baking and kind of turned things around. I think it’s a natural human experience. And—come to think of it—” She paused, giving me a wide-eyed look. “I think Emberlynn said you did the same thing. When you got away from your parents.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Ugh. We don’t talk about those assholes. I did kind of reinvent myself then, but like... that was survival mode, okay?”

“I see...”

I sat down opposite her, scrolling. A whole lot of models. All... tall, fit, beautiful. I felt nervous going through it, and I really wasn’t sure why. Maybe the fear of actually trying to measure up to any of them and the inevitability of embarrassing myself so much I’d shrivel up into a little husk and die.

“You look miserable,” Harper said lightly.

“Um... I dunno, I think they’re all kinda hot. That’s probably their thing.” I slid the phone back to her. She pushed it back towards me.

“Yeah, I know. They’re all photoshopped anyway. Just pick someone.”

“Um...” I scrolled through again, my stomach thick with anxious knots. Harper sighed.

“Paisley,” she said, finally. I jumped, hitting my knees on the table.

“Who? What?”

“You don’t need to be embarrassed,” she said. “You’ve never been one to do things in calm half-measures. Just go with whatever your gut is saying, that you’re ignoring because you’re scared of it.”

“I’m—” I scowled, but I caught myself, looking oddly at her. “Are *you* actually trying to encourage me to be over-the-top?”

She looked away with a sigh, a soft flush tinting her cheeks. “Maybe I am. Or maybe I want to make sure I get a perfect, clear vision of how obnoxious you are, so I don’t end up accidentally missing you once I’m gone. Who knows?”

I felt my stomach swoop, my heartrate picking up. I didn’t know why, just—it felt like I’d just been pushed off an edge and was gliding, not knowing if I’d drop.

But Harper wasn’t going to issue a challenge to me and escape unscathed.

I sat back in my chair, crossing my legs, and I said, “Please. I know you’re going to miss me so much you’ll be staring longingly at my picture all day every day.”

“I don’t plan on even having a picture of you.”

“I’ll send you one. And you can pine over it.”

She furrowed her brows. Come to think of it, maybe *pine* wasn’t the right word. I didn’t want to imply there was

anything romantic between us, even after—well, things. But whatever. I'd never bothered with getting the words right.

“Forget that,” I said, waving her off. “We’re starting the bucket journey. Tell me something you’ve always wanted to do in Bayview.”

She looked away, frustration and relief in equal measures on her face at the change of subject. “Get some peace and quiet.”

“Great! Where should we get some peace and quiet?”

She put a hand to her forehead. “I was referring to... never mind. Hell, I don’t know. I’ve never really thought about it.”

“What? Oh my god.” I pushed the dishes away from her place and I sat on the table facing her. “I gave you all of yesterday to think about it!”

“I was avoiding facing reality.”

“Well, reality’s knocking, and her name is Paisley! C’mon, give me something.”

She shrugged wildly. “Shit, I don’t know. Floating campers? Like the kind Ms. Connelly rents out?”

“Great!” I jumped down from the table, taking her hand and tugging her out of her chair. “It’s a date. Let’s go right now.”

“Pais—for crying out loud, I got about two bites of my food!”

“I forgot about the food.” I dropped her hand, sitting back on my side of the table.

Chapter 9

Harper

Ms. Connelly gave me a warm smile, standing up from the rocking chair she had by the window in the colonial-style bungalow shop and heading over to the register.

“Harper,” she said. “Getting out of the house a bit, are you?”

“Yeah, well... it’s spring, so you know. Starting to come alive a bit more.”

She hummed, waking up the tablet the register was on. Ms. Connelly was a woman in her late seventies, with the most adorable perfect old-lady perm, straight out of *Golden Girls*. She’d had a divorce just four years ago with the man she’d been with all her life and had just resigned herself to being with, talking herself down for the longest time that she was too old to start over, but she’d been pure sunshine ever since. She’d bought this cozy little house by the water and set up the sunroom as a rental shopfront for water equipment, although it was usually quiet here—I think she liked it that way, just getting to sit under the hanging baskets of flowers and read her mystery novels. She always outpaced Nancy on reading goals, and I knew from Anders that Nancy had an eternal grudge against her for it.

“Well, it’s good to see you,” she finally settled for saying. “Oh, I forgot to mention—the strawberries and cream cake, it was delicious. Nick loved it.”

“Your son was in Bayview?”

“Just for that weekend. You know, I keep trying to convince him to live here full-time, but he’s on about his nice house in DC... always trying to one-up the neighbors. Well, if I can get him to keep trying your cakes, that might just do the trick.”

Well, that would hardly work when I had one foot out the door, but... Ms. Connelly didn't need to know that. Or— she kind of did, because she was a pretty regular customer too, but it was so much easier to tell myself I'd take care of it another day. "I'll keep an eye out for nice houses that are up for sale. Then he can impress his neighbors here."

"You're a peach. What can I get for you, then?"

"Oh, er." I scratched my head. "I'm looking to rent a floating camper."

Her face lit up. "Oh, are you, now?"

I looked away. "Don't make it weird. I've just always wanted to try and never really got around to trying it."

"Paisley convinced you, didn't she?"

"It's not that... I can make decisions for myself, too, you know."

She just smiled knowingly as she tapped away at the screen, and I burned.

Still, it wasn't long before I was out at the water's edge, and I had the bright yellow and blue inflatable on the sand in front of me, kneeling and fumbling around inside it to get the tent part of it pitched properly. Paisley was late, because the woman had a god-awful sense of timekeeping and I had no idea why *I* of all people was attracted to someone who couldn't keep time, and I was going to jab a hole in the damn thing and let it drown at the rate it was giving me a headache, and I finally gave up and texted her.

Paisley where the hell are you?

She replied immediately. *oh shoot!!! I thought we said ten omg I'm cominggggg I'm just getting bubble tea please still love me*

I rubbed my forehead. This woman was going to be the death of me. She was a good reminder why I was leaving this damn town. Just getting away from her was reason enough.

She texted again. *do you want anything? they have tea!*

yeah, of course they have fucking tea. no, I'm good, I just want you to hurry up.

Ugh... I kind of did want bubble tea, now that she asked. The brown sugar milk tea—whatever Dani did to make it, it wasn't like anything I'd had anywhere else, and I was deeply craving it now that I'd thought about it, but I wasn't going to go back and tell Paisley I did want one. That would be mortifying.

So I went back to setting up the camper, and I'd finally finished getting the tent up and had it sitting while the inflator pump ran when I got another text from Paisley, a shot of her hands carrying two drinks. She'd... gotten me the brown sugar milk tea. She got it with half sugar, the way I liked it, too. I sighed. I had no idea how I was supposed to pretend I wasn't enjoying it.

I guess I'm having bubble tea. also, how did you take that picture? your hands are full

She replied right away. *paisley has her ways.*

Right. So she did. The fewer questions I asked, the better.

At least Paisley had picked a good day for a break, not that I imagine she'd thought about that at all—the air was cool and a nice breeze off the ocean kept it feeling brisk and fresh, but the clear-sky sunlight was warm. The air smelled fresh, clean, the salty scent of the ocean mixing with the smell of fresh grass and young flowers, and I breathed it in deep knowing I'd probably never get that feeling again.

Every place had its individual smell, and no matter where I went, it would never smell exactly like Bayview did in the spring again—that specific combination of aromas that felt like opening up the door and seeing the sunlight again. And if this was my last time taking a day off to go out and breathe it in...

This was what leaving always felt like, I knew. I had to get used to this kind of life. Bayview wasn't the last place I was going to have to leave.

“Yo, Harps,” Paisley’s voice called from behind me, and I turned to face her and genuinely, honest-to-god would have kept looking for her if I didn’t see the two cups of bubble tea in her hands.

She looked like a completely different person. She’d switched out the oversized sweater and shorts for a matching set of black sports bra and leggings, both printed with a sleek minimal design, and had a striking yellow coat pulled on over top, her hair pulled back into a ponytail and through the back of a baseball cap—I didn’t think I’d ever once seen her with her hair up, or with a hat. High-top sneakers with a color splash design finished the look, which might have been the first time I saw her wear something other than her ratty old tennis shoes.

And she didn’t have her glasses on. I wouldn’t have recognized her without the big round glasses alone. Everything else? If I hadn’t heard her voice, I’d have thought she’d asked someone else to deliver the tea for her.

She took quick steps from the paved path down onto the sandbar, and she thrust the brown sugar tea into my hands. “Don’t just stand there gawking. You could say hi. You know, the polite thing to do?”

“Uh—hi.” I flushed, it suddenly setting in that it actually *was* Paisley. She was... well, she’d always been more attractive than I wanted to admit, but this look—it worked better for her than I’d have ever imagined. “So... should I assume the reason you’re late is because you had to go shopping for clothes?”

“That took, like, thirty minutes. The reason I’m late is because I had to dig out my contacts and clean them. I probably need a new pair because I’ve had a new prescription since I got these, but I’ll do that another time. So? I look hot, right?”

My throat suddenly felt like it was coated with sand. I looked away. “You certainly went all-out with the restyle.”

Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw her shoulders slump. “Yeah... just, you know, just trying stuff. It’s the only way to

know what works. I guess it's an exploration."

Shit, she thought I hated it. Even just out of the corner of my eye, I could see she was mortified. I put a hand to my forehead. "Ugh, all right, fine. Yeah. You look good. It, uh... works well on you."

She snorted, looking away, sipping her tea. "Oh my god, even I don't want pity compliments, Harps. How pathetic do I look?"

"No—it's not a pity compliment, just..." The inflator pump went quiet behind me, and I turned to where the camper was ready, sitting on the sand close to where the waves lapped. It was taller than I'd expected once it was inflated—I wasn't exactly riding a lot of inflatable dinghies, so I hadn't really realized how big they got. Paisley followed my gaze.

"This our pimped-out ride?"

"*Pimped-out ride*. Is that what we're going with?"

"I call dibs," she said, ducking in through the tent flap and sprawling on her back inside. The sight made my chest feel tight—Paisley looking like this spread out all casual-cool looking up at me with that playful look in her eyes, waiting for me to climb into a small, private space with her. I swallowed. Why had I thought this was the thing to suggest? Especially after we'd had sex on a boat the other time, something about being out on the water with her again...

"Pais," I sighed, forcing myself to look away. "Do you think maybe we should put it on the water before we get in?"

"You can move it with me in it."

I scowled. "What do I look like, your assistant?"

The worst look I'd ever seen flared over her eyes. "Someone who knows how to follow directions," she said, her voice low, and I—my throat felt suddenly tighter, and I felt myself blush, hard. Dammit. I knelt and zipped up the tent flap, if only so Paisley wouldn't see how red I was.

"I'm going to push you as hard as I can," I said. "Better hold on tight to that tea."

“That’s what I thought,” she said lightly. Dammit. I didn’t know why this woman always won with me.

I dragged the thing along the sand, and I felt Paisley’s weight inside lurch as she shifted, laughing and squealing as it moved. It wasn’t as hard to move with her in it as I’d expected—it glided down the sand and into the water, far enough it was just about to push away from the sand and start floating, and I went around to the front, where Paisley had unzipped the flap and didn’t give me the chance to say anything—she grabbed me by the hand and pulled me into the camper with her, tugging me so I fell inside with a grunt, the whole thing lurching as I did, the momentum pushing us away from the sand and drifting out onto the water.

“See?” she laughed. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

The camper lurched and drifted, feeling like it would pitch and flip and drown us, and I fumbled around trying to balance the thing while Paisley just laid back relaxed in the center, her head and shoulders propped up against the back, looking at me with a big smile, clearly enjoying my struggle until we’d spun a full revolution and it became clear I wasn’t going to capsize the thing by leaning on the side. I relaxed, sitting up straighter, trying to look cool like I hadn’t just flopped around the place like a fish on land, and I zipped the camper shut before I punched the straw into my tea, settling in with a long, slow sigh.

“Would have been a lot easier if we’d done it the normal way, but that wouldn’t have been very Paisley of us, now, would it?”

She gave me a playful shove. “Just admit you don’t like fun, Harps. Good lord.”

“Your idea of *fun* is breeding lizards.”

“It was a one-off thing! Jeez. Nobody gives a girl a break.” She relaxed, looking out the small plastic strip with the view of the water—the rocky stone faces at the end of the sandbar and the outlines of Bayview’s colorful roofs past it, and then as we drifted in the other direction, the open ocean. It was a beautiful day today, but it was a weekday morning, so it

was quiet right now, a small yacht some distance away and a couple strolling the beach looking like toy figures in the distance, and just the two of us in the perfect serenity of the moment.

Well, maybe Paisley was serene. My heart was pounding.

“We should—” Paisley started, at the same time that I said, “I meant—” and we both stopped, looking at each other.

“You go,” she said.

“You go.”

She lit up. “Okay, great, I totally wanted to go. We should take a picture.”

“A what?”

“Oh my god, Harps. Photography! An art form developed from the invention of the camera!”

“Yeah, I know, but—but what do you—”

“For the frame, you dork. Remember? We’re going to put in it the memory of the thing you enjoyed the best from our bucket journey. So we should be taking pictures of all of them.”

“Oh, right...” I relaxed. “A picture of what? The camper?”

“What?” She scowled. “No way you’re not getting a picture with me and you. I dressed up just for you, so you’re getting a picture of me looking like a weirdo in my goofy outfit, now deal with it.”

Something lurched in my chest, because apparently I was that simple, and all I needed was to hear Paisley say she’d dressed up *just for me* and I was gone. She really did look... well...

“Fine,” I mumbled. “We’ll take a picture.”

She pressed herself up against me, her cheek pressing against mine, and it almost gave me a heart attack. “You’re the *best*. I love you.”

The bucket journey—or whatever the hell we were calling it today—was a mistake. I needed to make sure I was out of this town sooner rather than later.

Chapter 10

Paisley

Well, I was so embarrassed I felt like I'd die, but at least I could embarrass Harper too, and then it was like all was right in the world, right?

I'd spent at least an hour fussing around with different clothes, trying them on in front of the mirror, my heart pounding, and even going through the Pinterest fashion boards like Harper had recommended, and I *guess* if I was being honest, I'd admit that I kind of liked the way I looked. Untrained eye and all that, probably. I'd hunted through the boutique close to Gwen's house until I found a chic yellow coat and tried it on in the fitting room and gawked at myself because it was fitted *perfectly* to me and the color was my new favorite thing in the world, and for a second I'd felt like the coolest, most put-together, good-looking person alive.

I'd made sure nobody but Harper saw, because at least if she laughed in my face then I'd just have to hide from her for another month and a half until she was gone, and then I could never try at anything again. But then worse, she didn't laugh at me, just avoided saying anything about it, and even when I coaxed her to compliment me because I was about to die of humiliation, she just mumbled something about how I looked great.

So once we were in the camper and I'd successfully changed the topic, I made sure to take a selfie without getting too much of my outfit in it, because otherwise I'd have to delete it from my phone. I pressed up close to Harper's side to take a picture with her, and something about being this close to her made it all feel easier, like I could breathe easy, comfortably. She was just calming, somehow.

Or maybe Kay was right and I liked her. But I'd rather throw myself from the camper and drown than consider that thought any further.

I snapped the picture, and I set the phone down, reaching for my hat. “I can look more like normal so we actually know who’s in the picture,” I said, and she stopped me—shooting a hand out and catching me by the wrist, keeping me from taking it off.

“Wait—er.” She scrunched up her face. She’d clearly done it without meaning to. “I mean, I guess you can, if you want.”

I scowled. “What, do you have a kink for girls in baseball caps?”

“A kink—what? No.” She shook her head hard, blushing. It was so easy to get her to blush, but it never got old. It always felt like winning a prize. “Just... you know. You went through a lot of effort to style yourself up for this.”

“I didn’t really put in any effort,” I said, which was the most bold-faced lie anyone had ever told. “Just kind of grabbed some random things and threw them together.”

“You know, I can tell when you’re lying.”

I felt my face burn. “What? You cannot.”

“In the first place, you’re perfectly well-coordinated, so I don’t believe it was just random things...”

I stuck out my tongue, turning away. “Ugh, god, I told you I don’t want pity compliments. This is just round one, okay? I’m still honing my deadly eye for good looks and—”

She took me by both wrists, and she turned me back to face her, meeting my eyes with a resolute expression. “I know when you’re trying to avoid facing a topic, too.”

“Ugh—let a girl hide from reality.” I pulled my wrists away, sipping my tea. “I’m gonna crawl out of here and swim away, and we’ll just see how we like that, won’t we?”

“Paisley...”

“Drink your tea. It was very magnanimous of me to get it for you.”

She sighed, swirling her tea idly. “Thanks for the tea. That I specifically said I didn’t want.”

“But you did want it, didn’t you?”

“Well—” She fidgeted with her cup.

I was going to miss knowing her this well. I mean, sure, I had Emby, and I knew her every bit as well, but Harper was just... different. Somehow.

Harper sighed. “Hey, Pais?”

“What’s up?”

“Thanks for this.”

I turned and shot her a grin. “No prob. It’s good, right? Kay always puts in a little extra love. I think it’s just her thing.”

She looked away. “I think you know I don’t just mean the tea.”

“Oh. What? For being irresistibly gorgeous all the time?”

She hung her head. “For *today*. I needed a day off. And I needed to get out. And I needed to go do something I’d been thinking of for a while. So... thanks.”

Something pulled so tight in my chest I could barely breathe, and I pushed out a smile at her. “Paisley’s a genius. What else is new?”

“I’m being sincere over here.”

Sincerity sucked. But I guess I had to respect her efforts. I shifted closer to her, and I laid a hand on her knee, where she was pulling her legs into her chest. “Thanks for going along with it,” I said, speaking softly. “I’m gonna miss you... like, a *lot*. I’ll be thinking about you all the time, you know.”

She sighed hard, avoiding looking at me. “You’ll have plenty of other people to think about.”

“Yeah, and none of them are you. There’s always going to be a you-shaped space left behind here. And... you know, if you ever want to come back and visit, come see little old me

again, see what kind of dork-ass outfits I'm putting on next, that space will always be open for you."

She made a noncommittal sound, hunching into herself, looking away. "And see if maybe you've pushed your boundaries to include ketchup."

"Hey. I'll have you know I had ketchup on my eggs this morning."

"Incredible. And it didn't burn your mouth off?"

"Nah. I had scrambled eggs, so, you know, the creaminess kind of offset the spice."

She sighed. "I think... if I'm being honest," she said, her voice falling off smaller and smaller, and then she didn't say anything—just looking down at her feet, swirling her tea. I watched her for a while before I cleared my throat.

"If you're being honest, it typically involves saying something."

She looked away. "I guess it's going to be quieter there."

I scowled. "That's not typically what someone says when leaving somewhere like Bayview for somewhere like New York City. I'm assured it's much louder there."

She mumbled something, finally settling on a quiet, "It's just going to be... personally quieter without you there, I guess is what it really comes down to."

I blinked. "Harps, are you trying to admit that you'll miss me too?"

"Definitely not."

"Hmm."

She groaned, raking a hand back through her hair. "Okay, I guess I am. It's going to be, uh... let's say difficult to replace you. You're very... unique like that."

I scowled, looking away. "You could try not to make it sound like you're forced to compliment someone you despise."

“I—dammit, this isn’t easy. Will you just look at me?”

“Nah. I’m enjoying the scenery.” The scenery out the little window strip was nice, but shockingly, it actually wasn’t the reason I was pointedly turned away. She grabbed me by the wrist again, tugging, but I was steadfast.

“You’re not making it any easier. Same for your damn outfit. I’m not giving you pity compliments, I think you look good.”

“Yeah?” I gave her a lazy look. “I look hot, right?”

“Very,” she said, with that tone like it slipped out without her meaning to, and she froze at the realization of what she’d just said, eyes wide. She blushed again. Suddenly, I couldn’t find it in me to be embarrassed anymore. I turned to face her.

“Oh yeah?” I said. “You like seeing me in tight-fitting clothes, huh?”

“No—that’s not what I meant.” She was only getting redder. Now she was the one who wouldn’t look at me.

“Is it not? Maybe that you like how much skin this shows?”

“Paisley—I’m not—”

Screw it, the girl was leaving. I could have my fun. And suddenly this was *very* good for my ego. So maybe she was avoiding talking about it not because I looked funny but because this was her type? I could work with that.

I took her chin between two fingers, and I turned her back to face me again. It was like a magic switch—she gave in and let me move her effortlessly, doing nothing to fight it, and her pupils were dilated in that very familiar way when I tilted her back to meet my gaze. “Tell me honestly,” I said, my voice low. She swallowed, hard.

“I... um...”

“You want to tell me the truth, right?”

She bit her lip, casting her gaze away.

“Ah,” I called. “Eyes back here, Harper.”

“P-Paisley.” She moved her eyes back to meet mine, her lips parted. I couldn’t get enough of seeing her melt like this—putty in my hands.

“Go ahead and say it.”

“You... you look really good... I’ve just been too shy to say it, but you look really... really good.”

Well, good thing I’d dressed up. My heart was racing, and I felt seriously gorgeous—like I was as irresistible as I always pretended I thought I was. I bit my lip. “You think I’m attractive like this?”

“Paisley...”

I brushed my thumb over her chin. “Say it.”

“I-I do.”

I smiled wider. “That’s not really saying it...”

She swallowed so hard I felt it against my hand. “I think you look gorgeous... and—and very attractive.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear.” I caressed my thumb along her jawline, and she let out a small, aching noise from her throat, eyes closing and lips parting. I wanted to kiss her so badly it burned like fire in my lungs, all-consuming, just wanting to lean in and press my lips to hers, touch her, feel her...

“Paisley, I...”

She was so cute like this. I really couldn’t be blamed for not being able to help myself. I moved like it was an inevitable natural force, closing the gap between us, and I kissed her. She let out a small, muffled noise, tensing up, and I held there waiting to see if she pulled away, but she met me—she sank into me, pressing her lips to mine with a little gasp of need, and it burned me up from head to toe.

I went in hard, pressing against her firmly, fiercely, kissing, my hand going to the back of her head, burying in her hair and holding her against me as I kissed, quick, hard, furious. Harper gasped, small moans against me as I moved my lips against hers, softening and letting me lead as I kissed

her over and over, hard, fast—a burning hunger inside of me where nothing was enough, where I couldn't get enough, and all I could think was *more, harder*; kissing like she was oxygen.

And it stopped when she pushed me away, face flushed, breathing hard. It felt like a blow to the chest—why we had to stop if it was that good. Had it been just me? Why?

“Paisley,” she whispered, turning away. “We can't... do that.”

“It sure seemed to me like we could.”

“I'm *leaving*, Paisley. Leaving Bayview. You know that.”

“So? You're here now. And I want to kiss you again...” I trailed a hand down her arm, but I pulled away when she shrank into herself, hugging her knees into her chest.

“What do you *think*?”

“What do I think? I think that you're cute and I like kissing you.”

“Oh my god, I can't stand you,” she muttered, shifting towards the tent flap. “Let's go back to the shore. I'm done here.”

My stomach sank. I couldn't take the back-and-forth. I just wanted to know if I'd screwed up today or not, not... have my feelings yanked around like this. “We just got out here,” I protested weakly.

“And we got our picture. I experienced it. Cross it off the bucket list.”

I sank back against the far side, hugging my knees into my chest too. “Are you mad at me?”

“Am I ever not?”

“Tell me the truth.”

“No. I'm not...” She sighed, raking her fingers back through her hair. “I just need to get back to shore. And breathe.”

And... how..." She frowned, opening the zipper and looking out. "Er... how do we move?"

"Oh, you tie a rope to it before you leave shore, so you don't drift away and you can pull it back."

"And you... didn't bring that up before we left with no rope?"

"Oh yeah." I cocked my head. "I didn't really think about it. Ms. Connelly didn't give you one?"

"Nope."

I laughed. "She's a forgetful woman."

"I'm glad this is funny to you. Now what do we do?"

Stay with me and we can drift away together. That sounded romantic. Did I want that? Romance with Harper? The idea left me churning, and I couldn't figure out why. Wasn't love supposed to be hit-you-over-the-head obvious?

Not that it mattered. I'd pissed her off and she was trying to storm away.

"Paddle," I said.

"Son of a bitch. I'm going to look like a fucking idiot."

"I'll get out and push. I always look like a fucking idiot."

She raised an eyebrow at me. "In your nice new clothes?"

I shrugged off my coat and tugged my cap off, pulled the elastic out of my hair, and I pulled my leggings off, down to my swimwear bottoms. Harper blushed, looking away.

"I—Paisley. Tell me before you get naked."

"It's a bikini, you dork. I know you're not gonna faint at the sight of a girl in a swimsuit." I took off into the water, mostly just grateful for an opportunity to not have to look at Harper right now. Or maybe for her not to look at me.

This bucket journey sucked. And it was my fault. And—really, how did *anything* have the audacity to be Paisley Macleod's fault?

Chapter 11

Harper

At least Dingo wouldn't judge me. The whole world would judge me before Dingo did.

I stepped into Jeremy's pub, suddenly surrounded by the smell of beer and fried food—the exact smell I needed to lose myself in after Paisley being so damn oblivious I wanted to cry—and I nodded to Dingo, the big guy in a leather jacket on the far end, hunched over his laptop and wearing sunglasses. Never got the guy's deal—I don't think I'd ever heard him say a word—but no one in Bayview doubted he was a good soul. When I'd sprained my ankle my first summer in Bayview, he'd happened by where I was sitting nursing my injury by the side of the trail, and he'd hoisted me up in one arm as easily as if I was a doll and walked stoically with me back to town.

Jeremy said he was in here all the time for his side job of writing romance novels. I'd have believed either that or that he was hacking government servers to bring down the world order, but nothing in between. Either way, he nodded back at me, pausing to take a swig of his beer and go back to writing.

“You're looking down in the dumps,” Jeremy said, standing up from where he was cleaning out the fridge under the counter. “Weren't you closed today, for once in your life? Something happen?”

“Truth be told, Paisley just told everyone I was closing today so that she'd get an opportunity to show me something. And with everyone thinking I was closed, I figured there was no point opening anyway, since nobody would come in...”

He laughed. “Was it worth seeing?”

God, was it ever. I wasn't even sure what it was about her all dressed up that way that had made me weak in the knees. It was easy to say it was just a good look on her, or even just that I liked a girl with a keen sense of style, but...

there was more to it than that. She looked cute in her regular stuff, too, drowning in big hoodies and big glasses and big hair. Just... something about how she'd looked today...

“It was something she very well could have shown me after my shift.”

“Shocker. Well, it's your first day off all year, as far as I've heard, so... better treat yourself to something good. What can I get you?”

Screw it, I got fried chicken and beer. Some days were just fried-chicken-and-beer days. I took it to the darkest corner in the pub, hunching in the corner where the window was broken so Jeremy just kept the shutters permanently closed, and I shrank into the darkness to disappear, and of course, it was just my luck that that was when Paisley's sister made a once-in-a-lifetime trip to the pub and made direct eye contact with me the second she stepped inside.

I broke eye contact too hard, too abruptly. Not exactly avoiding attention. *Dammit*. Aria never came to the pub. She must have been picking up for somebody else. Part of me, distantly, wondered if it was for Paisley and she was also sad and needed to drown her sorrows in fried chicken and beer.

She wasn't picking up. She got fish and chips and had the nerve to sit down across from me.

“I hear you're closing,” she said airily, “Pais makes some veiled comments about you two, and then I find you lurking alone in the darkest corner of the pub with fried chicken? Dare I ask what's going on here?”

Dammit. The shutter was closed, so I couldn't even escape through the window. Paisley would, though.

Aria was a tall woman with long, brown hair and that picture-perfect dash of freckles over the bridge of her nose that freckles always looked like in photos and on models—she kind of looked like a model, honestly, with her tall, lean figure and almost unnaturally good looks. Macleods were just beautiful people, I guess.

“I think the real question is what are *you* doing here,” I said. “I would have thought greasy pub food is beneath you.”

“I’m unspeakably offended,” she said lightly, relaxing against the table with a comfortable smile. “Nobody is above greasy pub food every now and then. I had kale salad for dinner yesterday and a spinach egg white omelet for breakfast this morning, and my body was crying out for junk come lunch. Fish and chips sounded like the best thing that could ever happen to me.”

“Well, if you share Paisley’s metabolism, you can probably knock back three of those and not even feel bloated...”

She smiled drily. “Paisley gets in a lot more exercise than I do. All that climbing trees and running around jumping headlong through windows...”

“Yeah, touché.” No wonder she’d looked so good in that tight, athletic outfit. She was probably all lean muscle. I felt my face prickle, and I looked away. Aria smiled wider.

“So... now that we’re done with you dodging my question, Harper, do you want to tell me what’s going on with you and Paisley?”

I sighed hard. “It’s really nothing.”

She pursed her lips, studying me, and it got painfully awkward before long, but she wasn’t in any rush. She took a long sip of her iced tea, going through a few bites of her food in careful contemplation, before I broke.

“What?” I blurted. She narrowed her eyes just a fraction, giving me an odd smile.

“Paisley’s really very attached to you. I don’t know what you’ve done to her, but... well, ultimately, she is my sister, and I do care about her.”

“I haven’t done anything.” *She’s the one doing things to me.* I blushed harder. Dammit. I hoped the low light was hiding it.

“I’m just saying, she’s been in quite a mood lately and seems to have been talking about you all the time...”

“I think she’s in a mood because things have been off between her and Emberlynn.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Her and Emberlynn? How so?”

“Did Emberlynn not tell you?” Maybe I wasn’t supposed to bring it up. Aria leaned forward, folding her arms on the table.

“She didn’t say anything... she’s also been feeling off, but I think that’s more about her newest job.”

I looked away. “I might not have been supposed to say anything. Emberlynn was just telling me earlier about how she’s had a hard time feeling back to how things were with her and Paisley ever since she moved back to Bayview full-time. I’ll tell her I’m sorry for spilling it accidentally.”

Aria chewed her lip, thinking it over. That troubled look in her eyes spoke volumes.

“What’s bothering you?” I said.

She shrugged. “Just... wondering if I’m out of touch with Emberlynn. Does it say something bad if I’m not picking up on these things? Or if she’s not telling me?”

I relaxed. It was easy to forget sometimes that Aria Macleod was human. “I don’t think so. I’m going to intentionally tattle on her now about how she was bemoaning that you’re too cool for her, too good for her, too smart and pretty for her...”

She laughed. “Please. I’ve had impostor syndrome since the day of my big buyout. You don’t need to make it worse.”

“I think she’s just intimidated by you sometimes. Maybe just make a point to check in with her if you’re worried. She probably just gets too intimidated to bring things up to you.”

She relaxed into a smile. “I think I will. Thanks, Harper. You...” Her smile flickered. “Do you think I’m doing all right?”

I raised my eyebrows. “I think you’re doing perfectly, but... why ask me?”

She gestured past me. “You’re really at the heart of everything. Everyone passes by and shares their sorrows with you. You have a good eye for what’s going on... for the heart of the town. You and Priscilla are very alike, in that way, I think. I guess I just wonder what you think.”

It was a compliment, and a good one at that, so it probably wasn’t supposed to sit in my stomach like I’d eaten something bad. I cringed without meaning to, looking away. Aria arched an eyebrow.

“That’s a reaction...”

“Sorry. It’s nothing about you. Just made me think of something else I’m trying... not to think about.”

“That’s the other thing, that you don’t really talk about what’s going on for you often, do you?”

“I’m just a more private person,” I said lightly. “Anyway... you’re doing perfectly. Emberlynn adores you. She’s serious about you, you know.”

She gave me a small smile, nervous, vulnerable. “Yeah?”

“Ma’am, she moved to New York to be with you. You think she’d do that casually?”

“I just... like I said. I get impostor syndrome.”

“I think we all do sometimes.” I leaned across the table, putting a hand on her arm. “If it makes you feel better, I think the fact that you checked in to ask how you’re doing and what you can do for Emberlynn is a sign you’re doing really well.”

She laughed. “Thank you. Now that we’re done with that elaborate dodge of why you’re in here looking sad in the corner—why are you in here looking sad in the corner? And does it or does it not have to do with Paisley?”

“Ugh...” I scratched the back of my head, focusing on my beer. “Just let a woman sit in a dark corner with fried chicken and beer.”

“Fine, let me cut to the chase.” She put a hand up. “I think she likes you.”

I choked on the beer. Not exactly the smoothest move I could have made. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. “I’m not sure what I would have done to deserve such a punishment.”

“You can be glib all you like. I hope you don’t think it’s the first time I’ve sat through someone trying to avoid answering. I come from sales, you know.”

Dammit. No wonder she’d literally cornered me and then driven so relentlessly. Come to think of it—I wonder if opening up about her genuine insecurities might have been a technique to soften me up, get me more in a reciprocal sharing mood. I’d been played like a fiddle. I set down my drink with a sigh.

“If the way she expresses her interest in me is by breaking into my house through my roof, I don’t want her to be.”

“Well, that’s the other thing,” she said, a curious look in her eyes. “I’m not sure if she knows she likes you.”

I paused. “What do you mean?”

She picked at her food. “Paisley... well. Growing up, she never got to be in touch with her feelings.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. I’d been labeled...” She gestured airily. “Whiny, complaining. Told to stop making a fuss over everything I wanted, everything I felt, everything I needed. It left a mark on me, but... I think, if anything, it might have left a bigger mark on Paisley. I was her only sister. She looked up to me in a lot of ways of how she was supposed to be. And not only did she grow up only ever knowing me as not supposed to have emotions, she was supposed to join in on beating them out of me. She’d have to form a completely disconnected view from her own feelings to be able to adopt a mindset like that.”

I stared down into my food, just cradling the basket while my mind wandered. It wasn’t like it sounded completely

impossible, but... “I thought she threw all that kind of thinking away when she left her parents. Didn’t she used to be all... quiet and reserved?”

“She did. But that was survival mode.”

Huh. Paisley had used the same words. Come to think of it, everything Paisley had said this morning, after she’d dragged me out of bed... wanting to reinvent herself. Was she that scared of her own feelings?

“So,” Aria said, leaning back in her seat, “I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s been... hot and cold with you. You shouldn’t hold it against her. Despite everything... she is trying her best.”

I swallowed. I’d always just dismissed those... two times as being casual flings. And same for earlier, in the camper. After the first one, I’d... dared to let myself fantasize for a while what it might have meant, what we might do. And if I was being honest, I wanted to date her, even despite everything. But then the way she would act like nothing happened, flippant and casual?

I’d gotten upset earlier because she’d kissed me and hadn’t meant anything with it when it meant so damn much to me. But if she felt the same way and just didn’t know how to recognize it? It would explain why it was always me.

I felt my face prickle, knowing I was probably getting red enough Aria could see even in this light. It couldn’t be like that—it wasn’t fair. Wasn’t right. I was leaving. And besides, I was... well. I was Harper. I couldn’t do that. Annabel had been a lapse in judgment—an attractive woman who had openly pursued me, made me feel beautiful and desirable when I’d felt it the least. And it was good that it ended. I hadn’t been the one for her. And there couldn’t be a one for me.

Aria was comfortably waiting me out. The woman really did know how to negotiate. She wielded silence like a weapon, and I buckled.

“I guess I could see that,” I mumbled finally. “Maybe. But if it’s true, then... what should I do?”

“Well... do you like her, too?”

I swallowed. It felt like nails in my throat. I wondered desperately what it would be like to say yes—to tell Holcomb to pound sand and that I’d stay in Bayview, to tell Paisley how I felt, to try it out, to see what we could be. And we could kiss like we had earlier, anytime we wanted. And it would be Harper and Paisley, and all of our friends would think of us like that, *Harper and Paisley*, a unit. Together. Emberlynn and Gwen would probably freak. Annabel too. Kay would love it.

But I was Harper. I couldn’t do that. It was just... wrong.

“Not like that,” I said, my mouth feeling like I’d bitten into chalk. “I guess if I’m not being so glib, I admit I like her a lot, and it’s never boring when she’s around, but... not like that.”

Aria gave me the sad smile I needed not to see right now—buying the lie completely, and I had to recognize that I wished she hadn’t. “Then I think it’s worth talking to her outright. Tell her that you like her as a friend, but that that’s all. I think she could use the wakeup call.”

“And I’m the wakeup caller?”

She laughed. “You don’t have to, of course. It’s not your responsibility. But it would probably take a load off her mind, help her work out some things...”

I swallowed. “Well... yeah, maybe.”

She moved to speak, but she glanced down at something vibrating, and she pulled her phone from her jacket pocket. “Oh, god, I’m getting an important call,” she said, standing up. “I’m so sorry—could you tell Jeremy to box my food?”

Poor woman barely got to sit down. “I’m free today. I’ll drop it at your house and everything.”

“You’re amazing,” she said, taking off for the door, answering the phone as she plugged her other ear. I sighed,

slumping back in my chair, staring at the empty spot where she'd been.

Chapter 12

Paisley

I think I was stirring the sauce for like twenty hours before Emberlynn jumped out of nowhere into my kitchen, saying something and scaring the life out of me, so it was really only fair that I threw the spoon at her. She dodged, the spoon clattering on the table behind her, and she shot me a wild look.

“Jesus, woman, did you not hear the door—”

I threw a second spoon for good measure. She caught it, the bastard.

“You cannot tell me you threw that one out of surprise.”

I stuck my tongue out. “What are you doing here, you creep?”

“Checking on you. The whole day, you haven’t burst into my house or climbed onto my balcony or thrown a boiled eggplant in through my window.”

“Look, the eggplant thing was one time. And it was hilarious.”

“You wasted a perfectly good eggplant.”

“It made great compost!”

She shook her head, waving me off. “So I guess I’m just making sure you’re not dead. Now that I see you’re not, I guess I’ll leave before you throw another spoon.”

I rolled my eyes dramatically, going back to the sauce. “Jeez, you’re the worst human being alive. Do you want to taste-test this sauce? It’s for pulled pork.”

At least I could count on Emberlynn to cook with me. That had always been one of our love languages, and it was one of the places where we felt the same now as we always had, where this weird unspoken gap between us disappeared.

She tasted the sauce, and was immediately giving suggestions for what to add, and I barely got out the cabbage before she was helping me make coleslaw, too.

“If you want,” I said, once the food was just about ready, “you can take some for you and your boring loser girlfriend.”

“You mean your sister.”

“How many girlfriends do you have?”

She shook her head, smiling drily as she leaned against the frame to the dining room. “Yeah, I’ll grab some. Thanks, Pais. Er... are you cooking all this for yourself?”

“Nah. I’m bringing it over for me and Harps.”

She scrunched up her face. I put my hands on my hips.

“Oh my god, stop giving me that look! She’s my friend, you bozo!”

She still didn’t say anything. I huffed, turning back to where I was finishing tossing the meat in the sauce.

“Fine, I take it back. You and your lousy girlfriend get none of this food. It’s all for me and my *friend*, my *platonic friend* Harper who I am allowed to just hang out with normally.” Even though I’d made out with her earlier. I wasn’t thinking about that right now.

But Emberlynn, the little snot, didn’t say what I’d expected. “You know... I’d support you two if you got together.”

I tried to ignore the way my entire chest constricted until it felt like I’d pass out. I shot her a look. “Oh, yeah? So, what, you just disapprove of sex before getting together? Because I’ve got some terrible news about you and my sister that was terrible news for me to find out about too.”

She hung her head. “Please. It’s not that. Just... it was a surprise. And I’d thought it was a weird one-off. But after you did it *again*—”

“Hey, we just made out this time!”

She blinked. I put a hand over my mouth.

“I mean... that time.”

“Jesus Christ, Pais.” She put a hand to her forehead.
“You did *what?*”

“Nothing! Made out... some... shapes in the clouds...
we were watching clouds.”

“When was this?”

“Never! We never looked at clouds.” My face was
burning.

“Oh my god.” She raked her hair back. She’d picked it
up from Harper, now that I thought about it. I was suddenly
seeing Harper everywhere. “Is that why Harper finally took a
day off today?”

“No! I just thought she should have a day off—”

“You convinced her to take a day off?”

“Uh.” I blanked.

She put her hands on her hips. “And you went and made
out with her.”

“No!”

“No?”

“Ugh, yes. Shut up! She didn’t want it anyway. I got
rejected and shot down and now I feel like a rotten shitty loser
and I don’t want to talk about it, you smug little butt. I’m
bringing her food to try to smooth things out. Now go sit on a
tack.”

She looked like I’d just dashed water over her face,
blinking fast. “You... wait. What happened? You made out
and she—what?”

“What part of *don’t want to talk about it* don’t you get,
you clod?”

She put her hands up. “Okay, okay! I’m sorry. I’m...
sorry.” She winced. “That sucks. A lot. If you need somewhere
to crash, someone to yell at and cry on...”

I huffed, turning away. “God, put a sock in it. I’ve heard enough. If you take pity on me then I’ll... I’ll... I’ll turn into a porcupine and die.”

“A... porcupine?”

“It’s a figure of speech, dammit!”

She coughed lightly. “Oh, uh... of course it is.”

I slumped. “Um... thanks. I’ll let you know if I need to... you know.”

“Yeah. Anytime.”

Ugh. She was really good. And it was just me being weird that was making things... well, weird.

I felt like the world’s biggest loser heading out of the house and across the street, and dutifully, I trudged around to the back, the tiny brick courtyard lined with thin poplars and streetlamps, doors to all the residential lofts of the commercial block. Harper’s little secret neighborhood. She always had some drama about someone here—Steve always bringing the girl he was definitely cheating on his wife with into the shop, Fong always ticking off the neighbors by practicing her singing late at night. I wondered if Harper was going to tell any of them before she left, or if she’d just... disappear.

God, I hated this.

I tried Harper’s door, and she’d locked it, and there was no way I was climbing a tree with an armload of food, so I jimmied the window open and climbed through, taking the stairs up to the second floor and knocking on the doorframe into the living room. From the kitchen, I heard Harper jolt, banging something against the counter and muttering a curse.

“Paisley?” she called. “God dammit, that’s you, isn’t it?”

“I brought you dinner.”

“You did what?”

“Pulled pork sandwiches. With coleslaw! Potato salad, too.”

After a quiet second, I heard her trudging towards me, and she came around the corner, wearing a royal blue nightgown tied at the waist, her hair a mess. I blinked as she gestured me into the living room.

“Sure... I was just getting hungry. Thanks. You could have tried texting me instead of breaking into my house.”

“Did you just take a nap?”

“Nope. Just wrapped myself up in bed to watch TV.”

“And you didn’t invite me?”

She sighed, turning away. I realized a little too late that it wasn’t the best thing to say when I’d already kissed her and gotten rejected earlier today. If she didn’t want to kiss me in her floating camper, she probably didn’t want to snuggle in bed together, either.

I really did want to snuggle her in bed, though. The thought was kind of scary.

Harper still didn’t say anything, so I filled the silence as I followed her into the kitchen. “So... uh... what were you watching?”

“What do you think? GBBO.”

“Do you ever watch it and just cringe at all the things you and you alone know they’re doing wrong?”

She laughed. “It’s not like I don’t cringe sometimes, but... mostly I watch it to turn off my brain and look at pretty desserts. Do you want something to drink with food? I’m not having any more alcohol today, but you can help yourself, I’ve got that pineapple shandy you like.”

Oh, god. *Any more?* I didn’t think she realized the slip, but I wallowed in the realization that I’d gotten her to go drink alone.

It hadn’t felt like anything serious at the time—I’d wanted to kiss her, so I had—but her pulling away made it seem realer, ass-backwards as it was. My whole life felt kind of ass-backwards right now. And the more time passed, the more I sat with it, the more the weight of it was strangulating.

Why did I keep wanting to kiss her? And why had she let me twice but not a third time? She'd said it was because she was leaving, but we could have sex again before she left. Or if she wanted something more—if she wanted me—then wouldn't she... stay?

I realized I'd been quiet for just half a second too long, and I blurted the first thing to mind. "Orange juice."

"Orange juice. I never know what to expect with you. Sure, you got it."

I didn't want orange juice. But here we were.

The food was good, and the orange juice was not my favorite, but at least Harper seemed to love the food. She remarked on the tenderness of the pork, how rich the sauce was, the snap of the coleslaw, and then all of a sudden looked like her pet had died in her arms, going quiet and picking at her food. I blinked.

"Uh... you good? If you suddenly just converted to Islam, I can totally swap out the pork for something else."

"Not today, at least," she said, her voice dry. "Sorry. Just... nothing. Forget it."

"Hey. Tell me."

She shook her head. "Seriously. It's nothing."

"You're gonna tell little old Paisley, right?"

"You're younger than me."

"Ugh. One of these days I'm gonna be older than you."

She raised her eyebrows. "Good luck with that, Pais."

"So? You're gonna tell little young Paisley, right?"

She sighed, falling back in her chair, looking out the window. "It's nice of you to just... bring me food sometimes. Unprompted. Even if I wish you'd use the door. I, uh... I'm going to miss your cooking, is all."

My throat felt tight, and I kicked at the floor. "Well, you could just not go. I mean, how can you pass up spending time

with me?”

She closed her eyes, taking a long, shaky breath. “Sorry. I know it... sucks. For everyone. And I know I should tell everybody, but I... I will. When I’m ready.”

“What’s keeping you from being ready?”

“Look, I don’t know, Pais. I just know I... can’t, yet.”

I shifted forwards. “I can tell everyone for you.”

“Don’t,” she said, cutting in too quickly. Something flashed over her eyes. “Please.”

“Okay.” I slumped back in my seat. “Okay. Fine. But you cannot just put it off forever. If you don’t tell anyone before you go, then you’re not allowed to go. I’ll tie you down and make you stay.”

She forced a thin smile at me before she went back to the food. “I know. I’ll... I’ll do it. I promise.”

“You’d better,” I muttered, picking at my potato salad. She sighed.

“Hey... Paisley. I need to ask you something.”

“Thirty-three.”

“Thank you. That’s very helpful. Now that that’s settled, can I ask you another question?”

Damn. Looked like I wasn’t dodging it. “Shoot.”

She coughed lightly. “Do you, um... Christ, this is harder than I thought.”

“Do you want to write it down and pass it to me all secret-agent style?”

“No...”

“Write it down and leave the room and I’ll read it once you’re not here?”

She sighed hard. “Paisley—why did you kiss me?”

“Oh. Uh.” I blanked, the only thing coming to my head how it had felt to kiss her. The fact that I wanted to kiss her

again. “Because I... wanted to?”

“So you were just having fun.”

“Uh...” My face burned. I didn’t know why my heart was racing so hard. “Well... I’m sorry. I guess it’s polite to ask first.”

“It’s not that.”

“I, uh, I feel like I made things awkward.” I shifted. “We’re still going to do the bucket stuff, right?”

“Yeah, no, I mean...” She raked her fingers through her hair. “Paisley...”

I was so nervous I was going to be sick. *Why?* I had nothing to be this nervous about. It wasn’t like I was even picturing anything going wrong like I usually was when I felt like this, just... *nervous*. I wanted to beat my head on the wall like a conga drum. “What?” I said, finally.

“I’m trying to ask if it *means* anything, Paisley. You kissing me. That’s the third time. What’s it they say about threes?”

I blinked fast. “I think it means I wanted to kiss you three times.”

“God, you’re oblivious. Are you—do you have feelings for me, or are you just into casual sex together?”

I didn’t have a clue, but I felt like *I don’t have a clue* wasn’t a good answer. I swallowed. “I wasn’t trying to do anything serious. I just... wanted to.”

“So it was just that.”

This all was going to be easier if I just said yes. For her and for me. “Yeah. Um... are you mad at me?”

“No. I’m not. Just... I don’t think we should be doing that.”

It shouldn’t have hurt nearly as much as it did. This was just a fun thing, just a game we got to play. It felt like I’d gotten stabbed through the gut. I forced myself to smile. “Yeah? You said I was hot, though.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “I... did say that. It’s not that I don’t like... doing that with you. Just that I don’t think we... should be.”

“Why not?” I’d tried for a casual, easygoing tone. I didn’t recognize the quiver in it.

“Because...” she started, weighing every syllable carefully. “I’m leaving here soon, and I’m trying to be... less attached. Not more attached.”

I didn’t get it, but I was too tired now to keep asking questions. It felt like I’d worked out every muscle I had until I was collapsed on the floor. I took the tiniest forkful of potato salad, just to have something to do with my hands. “So... should I not dress up and stuff?”

“No, I want you to be able to do that. I know this is an important thing for you.”

I mumbled so quietly I could barely hear it myself. “I don’t want to cause you any problems and stuff.”

“It’s not like that.”

“I didn’t buy that new mascara anyway. I can just not buy it.”

“No, I—want to see you in it.” She pursed her lips, a flush of pink spreading over her cheeks. “I... I know getting to dress up this morning was good for you. And I...” She shrugged, looking away. “Hell, I don’t know. Maybe I just want to leave a positive imprint when I leave. Help you be happy in who you are so that I leave something good behind.”

My eyes burned suddenly. I wanted to grab onto her and tell her not to go, that she absolutely was *not* allowed to go and leave me heartbroken, but...

I sucked in a sharp breath. I wasn’t going to be weird.

“Let’s do something tonight, then,” I said, and she jerked up from the food, meeting my gaze.

“Do what?”

“You tell me. What’s next on the bucket agenda?”

“The bucket agenda... you know I need to be asleep before long, right? I’m open tomorrow.”

“Yeah, so tell me quick.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know... can’t we do it another day?”

“Not when you’re leaving soon. We’ll pick something best done at night.”

She shrugged. “Go up to Arden Park and stargaze? That’s—” She frowned. “That’s probably tacky. We can do—”

“Great!” I stood up, banging my legs on the table, and Harper jumped. “We’re doing that tonight. I’m going to go get ready right now.”

“Oh my god, will you sit still for one second?”

“*Me?* Absolutely not. Catch you here in a bit, you clown.”

“Paisley, your food—”

“Bring it to the park.” I marched away from the table.

“The stairs are that way—”

“I always wanted to try this,” I said, and before she could be a spoilsport and tell me to stop, I threw open the window and hoisted myself out onto the thick tree branch that ran past it. Behind me, I heard Harper clattering up from her chair, but I climbed down to the ground, touching down deftly, and I turned back to shoot Harper a thumbs-up as she leaned out the window looking down at me before I took off for the town center.

Chapter 13

Harper

My mind was miles away as I opened the bakery, absently kneading and laminating dough, all the way through opening and into the morning rush, where Anders came in a bit early saying Nancy had slept badly so a full-size cupcake was in order today, and Kay came in today grabbing a tray of donuts just to surprise Gwen. I'd never once known Gwen liked donuts, but hell, before Kay came around, I never knew she liked online shooters and egirls either.

Emberlynn was in late today, which meant Aria had felt better once she'd dealt with that phone call. She'd still seemed stressed when I'd stopped by on my way home with her takeout, but... must have been feeling all right this morning. I tried not to think about it.

"I hear you spilled all my deepest vulnerabilities to Aria," she said as she set down a loaf of sprouted grain bread, giving me a shy smile.

"Oh, yeah... forgot I was going to go apologize to you for that."

"Nah. I appreciate it. She made me some late-night coffee and sat down with me to ask about how I'm feeling, do a kind of... conscious check-in. It was really good. For both of us, I think. We're going to try making it a regular thing. So... thanks. Honestly."

"Yeah?" I put on a smile as I rang her up. "Damn, but you two act quick. I swear, the moment there's anything either of you can do..."

She laughed. "We get along great. Never thought I'd actually find a girlfriend who gets me like she does."

"You two are seriously adorable. And I'm happy for you both." And it felt especially heavy in the wake of last night's conversation with Paisley—leaving a good imprint behind,

leaving Bayview a better place than I'd found it. If I could help Paisley be herself and help Aria and Emberlynn be happier and more open together, then I didn't have to feel so guilty about leaving.

But I couldn't think about leaving right now. Or ever, hopefully. Not until I was out the door.

"Just the bread?"

"Yeah, that'll be good..."

"That was hesitation in your voice. You want cinnamon rolls, too."

"Hey—quit upselling me," she laughed.

"It's my job. You do want them, though, right? I'll even take a dollar off."

"Christ. Okay, you win. I'll take the cinnamon rolls. Aria's sleeping in this morning, so she'll love waking up to them."

Ew. That meant she went back to sleep after they were... done. I hated knowing the part Emberlynn kept quiet. It wasn't like I could tell her I knew.

At least it was a distraction, though. But once Emberlynn had paid and left and the couple of customers behind her had finished up, the morning rush trickled out to nothing, and I had only the noise of my own thoughts to sit with as I restocked the floor. And it was there in the middle of it all that I got a text from the woman who had been occupying my every thought since I'd laid next to her watching the stars last night, far enough away from everything that I could see more stars than I ever thought existed, following as she pointed out one constellation after another.

She'd looked really damn good in that makeup, too.

hey loser! what are we doing today?

I tried not to smile as I replied. *texting me in the middle of my shift, from the looks of things.*

hahahaha you're hilarious. answer the question before i go berserk

Are you telling me we're going on another... bucket journey today?

obviously?????

Well, if it was that obvious. It wasn't like I wanted to fight it anymore. I was... curious what kind of look she'd wear to today's.

don't know... you've given me prompts now for the last two. I'm waiting for the next.

an attraction you've never gone to.

She pounded that out instantly. I chewed my cheek, mulling on it. *honey's?*

She responded with an eloquent, *asjdfhsfjkhdsksfs*, and then after that, *you've never been!!!????!?*

nope. have a feeling that's about to change.

jesus christ you are forsaken by the gods. we're fixing that!! be there at four ok??

I laughed despite myself, sending a thumbs-up emoji. A kind of lightness settled in my chest, one I hadn't felt much recently—just a casual, easy feeling, and it shattered like glass when I looked up and saw the exact one person I needed not to see right now, apparently having come in without me even hearing her.

Priscilla gave me a knowing smile. "You look happy," she said, setting a brioche loaf on the counter. I busied myself putting the phone aside, ringing her up, not looking at her. Like that would save me.

"Didn't even hear you come in. Just the brioche?"

"Mm-hm. So... things are going well with her?"

"Don't know who you're talking about. That's five forty-five."

She laughed, leaning over the counter, eyes sparkling. She was dressed nicely again today, with a flowy shirt tucked into a skirt, a jeweled hairpiece gleaming in her hair. I wondered if Paisley would wear things like that, too. What she'd think about Priscilla's fashion sense once she'd developed more of her own. If she'd...

"You're thinking about her right now."

"I—dammit, Priscilla—" I scrunched up my face. "Five forty-five."

She shook her head, smiling, and handed over her card. "You spent yesterday with her, didn't you?"

I focused on swiping her card, well aware how useless it was against her. "I spent yesterday curled up in bed watching TV. Doing something special with your brioche?"

She rolled her eyes, smiling. "Okay, we can change the subject. Yeah. I'm finally able to take the evening to myself after classes today, so... Annabel and I are having a little at-home date. We each decided to bring something nice to surprise one another. This is my pick. If she comes around here to get a brioche, um... try to subtly convince her the brioche isn't good today?"

"You know she goes all in on something once she sets her sight on it. She's probably going to spend the whole time you're in classes making an elaborate six-course dinner."

She pursed her lips. "Harper. This is you trying to convince me to buy something else."

"Annabel loves chocolate chip muffins."

"You are so one-dimensional," she laughed, waving me off. "Just the brioche! She insisted I didn't buy her anything too expensive. So... anyway, yes, I am doing something nice with it. Now... back to you?"

I looked away. "Yeah, we hung out yesterday. It was nothing like you're thinking."

"Mm. So why aren't you looking at me?"

“Because... you’ll start speculating about my deep, abiding love for her and analyzing my face.”

“I’m not analyzing your face,” she laughed. “Just that you seem so... pulled in two directions, you know? You’re so happy, but you’re so sad. And I don’t know what this thing you’re hiding that’s giving you all that stress is.”

I sighed, putting her brioche in a bag and sliding it over to her with her card. I could have just told her, but... maybe it would be easier to have her say it first. “Guess.”

She gave me an odd smile. “You do know I can’t actually read minds.”

“You get damn well close enough. Guess.”

“You... admitted to Paisley how you feel but you can’t get together.”

Asking her to guess was the wrong idea. She was going to see all my reactions and start reading into them. “Nope.” Even though she was not far off. Was it even technically incorrect?

“Hm.” She chewed her lip. “The way you’re closed off, how you have that far-off look in your eyes like you’re looking at everything from a bird’s-eye view... how you seem to be looking at everything with a sense of nostalgia for things not even gone. You have a big life change coming up, I imagine. Are you closing up shop here? Maybe... leaving?”

My heart pounded wildly, and I had a sick feeling in my stomach—my mouth was dry, and the automatic response was to deny it, but what the hell. She’d know I was lying. “Yep,” I made myself say, and she went wide-eyed.

“Seriously? You... you’re leaving?”

I sighed. “I have a lot of work to get to...”

“When?”

“The work? Right now, actually. The point was saying I need to be alone.”

“Harper.”

I turned away, leaning back against the counter. I really needed someone to walk in. Of course nobody was. “End of April.”

“What? Oh my god, that’s so soon.”

“Yep.”

“You...” She was quiet for a long time, seconds melting out into hours, before she spoke softly. “Keeping it inside really is tearing you apart, isn’t it?”

It felt like she’d reached into my chest and grabbed my heart, twisted it around. I took a steady breath before I responded. “I’m working up to telling everyone. It just seems like a pain. And I’m not used to being under that much attention... it’s kind of annoying.”

“Where are you going?”

“You have to promise not to tell anyone.”

“Of course.”

I chewed my cheek. “New York. I, uh... got an offer to work for an ultra-luxe catering company. Piggybacking off my success in the competition.”

“Really?” Her voice lifted a little. “Harper—that’s huge. Congratulations.”

I wished she’d had stuck with being sad. Somehow, saying that made it feel realer, made it hurt twice as much. I made a noncommittal grunt, shrugging. “It’s just part of the climb. Nothing special.”

She was quiet for a while longer before she said in a voice so small I barely heard it, “Hey... Harper?”

“Yep?”

“Who are you doing all of this for?”

I sighed. “For a lovely young woman called Harper.”

“You... have that feeling about you like I did when I was going to leave for the Olympics. Like you’re doing it all for something outside of you. But it’s so... sad.”

Christ, I could *not* have this conversation. I pushed away from the counter. “I’m doing this for me. We’ve talked about it plenty. I need to be moving forward.”

“Or what?” she called after me as I headed for the back.

Or else she’d be disappointed.

I was glad I had my back to her. She’d have seen all of *that* clear as day.

“Or else I get bored,” I said, and I pushed through the swing door into the back.

I stayed in the back for longer than I needed to, fussing with the cookies, traying them up in their clamshells more carefully than anyone cared about, even after I heard the doorbell chime—just pushing it as long as I could until I pulled myself together and went out to face the next customer.

Luckily, I felt like I got the upper ground, because Annabel texted me *hey, give me an idea of something nice for dinner*, and I got to poke at her about what it was for and watch her dodge the question trying to be cool until I got her to break down and admit to her cute little date thing with Priscilla, and I enjoyed playing dumb and pretending I’d heard nothing about it. I recommended something with the vegetarian sausages Priscilla liked, because I knew how much it had meant for her when Annabel had started keeping them in her house just for Priscilla, and I knew Priscilla was a squishy, sentimental romantic, so, easy enough, really.

But no amount of the work going well and closing up for the day got me really ready for when I was at Honey’s, the cute little loft bar across the street from Paisley’s bookshop. I leaned back against the doorway for the loft, hearing the music playing from upstairs, and I tried to look cool and collected as I checked my phone every two seconds watching the time for when she might show up.

The damn woman was late again. I was on and off a million times whether to text her, opening the chat and closing it over and over and over, and I was about ready to lose my

mind when Paisley's voice came from next to me, clearing her throat.

Turned out I'd seen her coming out of the corner of my eye, I just had not realized it was her. She was wearing fucking *heels*. Black sandal heels and a fitted little black dress—I didn't think I'd ever seen her in a dress before—and smoky-eye makeup with a nude brown lipstick, and... blonde hair.

"Go ahead," she said, gesturing to herself. "Just spend all day staring."

"Uh... sorry, I'm waiting for someone."

She rolled her eyes. She was... taller than me in heels. I'd never in a million years have guessed I'd be into it. "Does being difficult turn you on or something?"

"Is that a wig?"

"Nah. Always wanted to try blonde. What do you think?"

"You bleached your hair? Just like that?"

She put her hands on her hips, scowling. "All this, and you haven't said a single compliment!"

Paisley Macleod was seriously the most beautiful woman I'd seen in my life. Where the hell had she pulled *this* from? Not just that it was an objectively stunning look on her—the blonde suited her damn well, too—but that look like she was so damn alive, that slight thrilling under her expression, the light there in her eyes?

"Where did you get that dress?"

"That's not a compliment, either!" She folded her arms, leaning against the wall next to me, looking away. "I got it ages ago. And never had the guts to wear it."

My mouth was dry. "Uh... well. Here we are. Do you want to go in?"

She gave me a look that was actually hurt, and it felt like a knife in my chest. "Should I go change?"

“No! Don’t—uh—” I lost the battle. My face was suddenly molten, and I knew I’d gone from zero to a hundred on redness. “I, er... please don’t.”

She settled into a big smile. “Yeah? You like it?”

“It’s, uh...” I cleared my throat, looking away.

“Come *on*. Say it.”

“You... you look beautiful. Seriously. Just... I...” I cleared my throat hard enough it hurt. “I like seeing you come into your own.”

She shifted in closer. “Look at me while you say it.”

Dammit. I moved automatically, turning to look at her, my face burning. We had some cover behind the ferns along the building, but... we were still in public. And yet I responded as if it was just the two of us, like she had me on a hook. “You... you look beautiful. Really, really beautiful.”

She stifled a giggle into her hand. “Thanks. You too. I like your blazer.”

I shouldn’t have worn it. This looked like a date now. “Thanks... I, uh, I like your... makeup.”

She batted her eyes. “Yeah? It’s a new mascara.”

“I am... glad you got it.”

She winked at me, blew me a kiss and everything. I should have told her off for it. Instead, my brain actually went blank—all the thoughts in my mind just fizzled away, and I was left staring wide-eyed. She laughed, walking past me, and she slipped her hand into mine.

“C’mon, dork. Let’s go.”

I stumbled as she pulled me by the hand up the stairs, my heart in my mouth, wondering what people would say if they saw us walking in hand-in-hand like this—I *really* should not have worn the blazer—but I relaxed when I realized, with an odd sensation, that nobody was... actually going to realize this was Paisley.

Well. Maybe I'd be able to spend the evening with this mysterious woman, then.

Chapter 14

Paisley

I was gonna freak.

My heart was racing so much it felt like it was going to pop like stepping on a cherry, walking up the cramped, creaky wooden steps to Honey's, but my mastermind gambit had paid off—the looks people gave me were like they'd give a stranger.

Damn. I knew it wouldn't last long, once people found out my hair was blonde now, but... I wanted to enjoy the moment. Just me and Harper looking obnoxiously beautiful in a blazer.

Honey's was so cute, I was literally obsessed—I used to hit it up all the time when I was new in town, a bar and a cheesy arcade in one, but I hadn't been in a hot minute. It had been where I'd met Annabel for the first time, when she'd tried hitting on me. I'd hit her with the all-powerful *thanks but no thanks*, and we'd been friends for life.

So there was something about using it as one of Harper's goodbyes to Bayview. But if I thought about that too much then I'd turn into a sentimental little blob and wail on the floor and then everyone would know it was me, so... that was out of the question. Instead, I bought Harper the Honey Special, their signature cocktail—even God was powerless to know what was in the thing—and I dragged her to the back corner, shrouded in low light and shadows, to watch her drink it.

“It's, uh... what's in it?” she said, holding the thing up to look in the side.

“Deliciousness and love.”

“Yeah, that doesn't answer much.”

“Just drink it and let your life be changed. Oh! But we've gotta take a pic first.”

“Well, of course. We’d die otherwise.”

I elbowed her lightly. “See? You get it.”

I got a picture of us with our Honey Specials, and I spent a second after just staring at the picture.

I looked... different. And even though it was scary, I think I looked kind of good.

Harper had certainly thought so. She’d just about tripped over herself to tell me not to go get changed. I wanted to bottle up the way that moment felt and hold onto it forever, getting complimented by a beautiful woman.

I couldn’t keep myself from laughing at the sheer amount of trepidation she had going into her drink, but she eventually took a sip and agreed that it was good—I couldn’t get her to acknowledge that it was made of deliciousness and love, but I got all I could out of her—and we hit up the vintage arcade cabinets after our drinks, Harper showing off her skills like the annoyingly talented beautiful woman she was.

It took another drink and a bit of dragging her to the dance floor for me to realize I kept thinking of her as beautiful, and suddenly it was all I could focus on—a track on repeat in my mind, every time I looked at her, fixating on the shape of her face, the curves of her lips, the lift of her cheeks, the slight point to the outsides of her eyes that made her gaze look so sharp, so... beautiful.

I kept replaying the moment of her asking if I had feelings for her in my head, and if I was being totally honest, it kind of scared the life out of me.

At the end of the night, both of us a couple drinks deep and a little delirious on having danced too much, we slipped out of the bar and around back to the park overlook, breathing in the cool, brisk night air, clean and fresh coming in off the park, and she leaned against the railing next to me, looking out over it all. The park sprawling below the boardwalk overlook was pretty and all, but... somehow I couldn’t keep my eyes off Harper.

“So, enjoyed bucket number three?” I said, and she laughed.

“You suck at figures of speech.”

“*What?*”

“A bucket list isn’t... a list of buckets. It’s a list of things to do before you kick the bucket. As in—die.”

I scowled. “We’re not dying.”

“Well—no, but you’re the one who decided to use it as a metaphor here.”

I put my hands up. “Okay, whatever, hotshot. So, enjoyed kicking bucket number three?”

“That’s worse.”

“Oh my god, there’s literally no winning.”

She laughed, turning to me, and she seemed to lose her composure when she did—her cheeks tinted pink, and she glanced away shyly. “I’m glad we got to go. Thanks for taking me.”

I suddenly got the trope about kissing at the end of a date, and all the magical things it meant. This wasn’t a date—even though I guess it could have been in another world—but I wanted to kiss her *so* badly. She was so pretty. I hadn’t been able to stop thinking it all night. Was it just because I’d been thinking more about what beauty looked like to me, or was it... more than that?

I couldn’t handle it being more than that, so I chose to believe that it wasn’t. Case closed.

“Still plenty more where that came from,” I said. “Go get some sleep, gorgeous.”

Whoops. I’d meant to say *dork* or *loser* or *nerd* or something. Harper blushed harder, giving me a nervous smile. “Yeah... sorry I’m such an early sleeper.”

“Nah. You’re cute like this.” I reached out and caressed her cheek, which—come to think of it, that was a hell of a move, wasn’t it? I wondered when my hand had even gotten

there, but hey, I liked the way she reacted, melting into it with her brows arched, eyes closed, lips parted.

“I’m... guessing you’re going to take me somewhere else tomorrow?”

“Honestly, I should probably put some hours in at the shop, y’know? People will start forgetting it’s there.”

“Any idea how you’re addressing the blonde hair?”

I made a show of being surprised, touching my head. “Oh, what? Oh... it’s blonde. Did I do that?”

She sighed. “Yeah... thing is, I think people actually would buy that from you.”

I winked. “Paisley the mastermind. But I’ll see if we can squeeze in something together.”

“Well, I’ll... try to think of the next bucket.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” And my self-control lost, because I leaned in and pressed my lips to hers—a quick kiss, just a second, leaving her there breathless and reeling, eyes wide, blinking fast, and I tried to ignore the way my heart beat wildly in my chest as I turned away.

“Paisley—”

“See you tomorrow, Harper.”

“I... I’ll see you tomorrow...”

I got home in a rush and collapsed on my bed, staring up at the ceiling, and I heard myself giggling. Wonder what that was about.

Either way, I got changed, taking off my superhero disguise and changing back into regular old Paisley, glasses and oversized sweater, and I tried to make myself a midnight snack, but I didn’t have any crackers, so I climbed over the fence into Emberlynn’s yard and popped open the back door. Aria caught me on my way out, my hands full with crackers, and she raised her eyebrows as she paused at the bottom of the stairs.

“You’re... blonde,” she said.

“Oh. Yeah. I found some hair bleach and decided to see what it did.”

“*What it did*, as if it’s up for debate...” She sighed. “Blonde and stealing food. Well, at least the blonde part is new. It suits you. You actually applied it pretty well too. I’ll tell Emberlynn not to jump when she sees a blonde girl in the house crawling around under the sink.”

“You’re marginally okay sometimes, Ar,” I said, skipping on out of the house.



I got some hours in at the shop that night, flipping the sign around and cleaning up the shelves that had accumulated a bit of dust—I hadn’t worked in a couple of days now, but, like, sue me. A good few people came in, and only Charlie stopped to ask me about my hair, so maybe I was surviving this thing after all.

I slept for maybe four hours that night, too excited somehow to stay asleep, and I cleaned up and headed out to the shop again, half because I wanted to get some time in while Harper was still working so we could both have the evening and half because I needed somewhere to pace excitedly and talk to strangers. I was at the till watching a couple of people leave when I got a text from Harper, and all I could think was the sudden memory of kissing her flashing through my head.

I talked to Anders about interesting things to do in town, and he recommended some kind of treehouse thing south of town. Do you know what he’s talking about?

I almost threw my phone across the room fumbling to respond. *oh my GOD you’re going to love it. i’m booking a stay there for the night right this instant!!!*

for the night?? She responded right away, so at least I wasn’t the only one fumbling to text immediately. *I have to be back here in the morning, I can’t sleep in a tree all night*

I replied with a *take the day off tomorrow too* and a heart emoji, and she spent a minute typing.

I took the other day off already.

you know, most people take two days off in a week. every week, even, for a lot of them!!! scary stuff

She didn't respond, which meant I had to take drastic measures. When the door opened and Sam came in, I came around the corner and made a beeline for him.

"Sam! Oh, thank god it's you."

He put his chest out. "It's me! Uh... waiting for a hero?"

"You're going to work at Jenna's today, right?"

"You know it. I'm gonna see you there, right?"

"Listen, big guy, Harper is in critical need of a special kind of remedy called treehouse therapy. She has to sleep in a treehouse tonight. I've already booked it for her, so I just need you to make sure everyone knows she'll be out of the shop tomorrow, okay? Make sure Jenna puts on extra pastries and stuff for tomorrow, she's gonna be swamped."

He scratched his head. "Uh, treehouse therapy—is that a thing?"

"Oh my god, dude. Keep up. I'm not even gonna answer that. Just tell me you'll do it. It's for her wellbeing!"

"All right, all right."

Score. Paisley was a genius.

It was three hours later before I got a call from Harper, and I picked it up all too happily.

"Hello, my dear Harper," I hummed.

"Pais, what the fuck is treehouse therapy?"

"The only remedy for you, my dear Harper."

"Jesus Christ. Fine. Fine, I'm closing tomorrow. Why are you like this?"

I leaned against the counter, trying not to smile too obnoxiously and doing a terrible job. “Psh. You love me. I’ll see you tonight, okay, Harps? It’s a little out of the way, so I’m renting us a car.”

“I honestly forgot you even know how to drive.”

“I’m a good driver, thank you. Five o’clock, pretty dork.”

Apparently my mouth settled for something between *beautiful* and *loser*. Whatever. She didn’t fight it.

I spent a dreamlike while getting ready, just trying stuff on in the mirror and obsessing over every detail, imagining how Harper might react to me wearing this or that—wondering if we might kiss again—and I even blew my hair out. It had been a minute, but hell, I looked hot like this.

And I hadn’t realized that I could look this good.

I nipped out quietly to grab the car, and I was lucky Stephanie at the rental barely knew me, because she had no idea who I was when I showed up in my full look. I almost went for a sleek black sedan before I realized that was what Aria would pick, so I went with the red instead, and I went around to the lot next to Harper’s business block and texted her a selfie. I fussed over every detail of it, retaking it three times and throwing a filter on too, and I sent it with the caption *just so you don’t get too tongue-tied seeing me here*

The message marked as read quickly, but it took a while of her starting and stopping typing to reply. *I’m a little underdressed. I thought we were going to a treehouse.*

Oh yeah. I probably was overdressed for a treehouse. Still, I scowled at the screen. *I swear, I put SO much of myself out there and you can’t even give me a compliment.*

She replied without the compliment, but with something else I needed. *do you want bubble tea?*

I almost dropped the phone. *Oh my god do you even have to ask??? I want the matcha one pleeeassseeeee you’re the best Harper I love youuuuu*

She replied with, *all right good, just confirming, now do you want to unlock the car?*

I jolted to where Harper was standing outside the passenger side door, holding a drink carrier with two cups of bubble tea. The little rat had already known I wanted the matcha one. She was too good.

I unlocked the door, and she stepped inside, handing me my drink as she settled in. “Quite the ride you’ve got.”

“How long were you sneaking up next to me?”

“I sent that text as soon as I got here.”

“And not a compliment?”

She shut the door, looking away. “You look gorgeous. That color is beautiful on you.”

That one, I could work with. I hummed happily to myself as I sipped the tea, started the car, and pulled out of the lot. “I make anything look good,” I said lightly.

“I would believe it,” she said in that small voice where she hadn’t meant to say it. She swallowed, folding her hands in her lap, but I just focused on driving instead of teasing her today.

She really was cute, though.

Chapter 15

Harper

I needed treehouse therapy, as humiliating as that was to admit. It was a bigger house than *treehouse* implied, still not much more than a loft but certainly comfortable enough to sleep in, and being wrapped up in nature, leaves outside the windows and the water in view sparkling under starlight—it was glorious.

Paisley had booked us a loft with two twin beds, and I tried not to feel disappointed when I saw it, reasoning that I did not want us sharing a bed right now, even though I knew better than that.

It was more of a small treehouse resort, honestly—there were rope bridges running between the thick, tall trees, winding through lush natural strips and the treehouses. Paisley and I walked through it all, slowly, side-by-side, finishing our bubble tea and then stopping into the central building—built on ground level, but the bridges connected to the second floor, so we never touched the ground—to get dinner together. And sitting at a beautiful restaurant like this one across from Paisley, wearing a cute, chic red minidress with an A-line silhouette and subtle pleating adding a playful character, watching the way her eyes sparkled when she laughed...

There was no explanation for the all-consuming feeling in my chest, the way she seemed to take up my entire mind. It wasn't like I didn't know I was in love with her, but just... having to sit here and process that fully? Really wrap my head around what it meant?

One of Bayview's signature sudden rainstorms picked up while we were finishing up, and we grabbed an umbrella and hurried back to the treehouse, Paisley giggling the whole way until we collapsed back under a solid roof and got to watch the leaves outside the window swaying under the weight of the water, and she threw her bag and the umbrella on the bed.

“Paisley—you’re getting the bed sopping wet.”

“Oh, shoot.” She laughed, taking them out of the bed and hanging them up by the door instead.

It was only once we were heading for bed that I realized it had been intentional, when she sat down on the bed she’d gotten wet and made a face.

“Ugh, it’s soaked. I’m not getting any sleep here.”

It didn’t look that bad. I shrugged, sinking back into the other bed. “Strange how these things happen. Fine, we can share.”

“You’re the literal best ever,” she sang, dropping herself on top of me in bed. It was a small bed, so there really wasn’t room for us to do anything other than cuddle, but...

“You’ve told me a million times I’m the literal worst ever.”

“You can be both. You contain multitudes.”

She was so soft, so... small. I settled on my side with an arm over her waist, and the soft texture of her pajama shirt, the small shape of her waist... this close, with both of us a little rained on, the scent of her flooded my senses, and it was like there was nothing in the world but me and her. No Bayview, no bakery, no Holcomb, no leaving for New York, no families, just me and her, tangled up like this.

Paisley’s expression softened. “What are you thinking about?”

I should have lied. I couldn’t. “How nice this is...”

She settled into the sweetest smile I’d ever seen, nestling closer. “Yeah? Fan of treehouse therapy?”

“Mm-hm... I’ll give you this one.”

“As you should,” she laughed, and then as effortlessly, naturally as the rain pattering against the roof outside, she sank into me, her lips meeting mine, and I didn’t fight it. Couldn’t fight it, not for my life—she had me completely under her spell, and I didn’t want it any other way.

We kissed long and slow, Paisley slowly rolling on top of me, pinning me down, the noises between us growing heated, hungry. I felt burning between my legs, aching with need, but I couldn't... I wasn't...

“Hey, Harper,” she whispered, pulling up from the kiss, hovering over me, eyes gleaming. I bit my lip. Her on top of me like this was... well. I got a bit dizzy.

“Er... yeah?”

“Do you want to keep going?”

I felt my face burn. “I... Paisley. You know we shouldn't ___”

“Ah—” She put a finger to my lips. “I didn't ask if we should keep going. I asked if you want to. Be a good girl and tell me what you want.”

This woman was going to give me a heart attack. I swallowed hard, a numb feeling going through me, but I found I couldn't resist her... not like this. Not when all I wanted was to do everything she said. I nodded, and a wide smile lit with hazy desire flared up over her face.

“Just nodding isn't enough, Harper. Look me in the eye and say it.”

I lost my breath, my head spinning, but I couldn't... not listen to her. I looked her in the eye, my face burning, and I whispered, “I... want you.”

She bit her lip, hard. “Good girl. Tell me what you want me to do.”

“To... I...” My breath was shaky. “I-I don't know...”

“I know you have fantasies. Go ahead and tell me.”

Dammit, *she* was the fantasy. I pressed my head back into the mattress, sighing frustratedly. “Anything.”

“I know you have something in mind.”

I wanted her to tie my wrists together above my head and fuck me into the mattress, but in no universe was I saying that. I felt my skin prickle under the awareness, and I looked

away. Paisley put her fingers to my chin, turning me back to face her again.

“Ah-ah. There we go. Good girl. Tell me.”

“To... to touch me.”

She bit her lip. “I’m going to need you to be more specific than that.”

“Oh my god, Paisley.”

She caressed her finger down my front, teasing along my collar. “I know you want to tell me.”

The touch of her fingertip along my bare skin electrified me, and I moaned involuntarily into the touch. “Paisley...”

“Be a good girl and say it.”

“I want you inside me.”

She bit her lips through a smile. “Good girl. And?”

“And... my—my wrists—above my head—”

She leaned in closer, whispering. “You want me to tie you up and fuck you, is that it?”

I burned over my entire body, but I nodded. “P-please.”

“Good girl, Harper.” She bent down and pressed her lips to my neck, kissing, sucking lightly at the skin, and I bucked up into her as she worked her hands up my shirt, touching me, aching hot and desperate against my body. I felt like I’d die without her—like I’d fall apart if she didn’t take me right now.

“Paisley—I want—you too—please—” My voice came out so small, so pitiful, tugging at her shirt. She laughed lightly, sitting up and pulling her shirt off, the small, round shape of her breasts spilling out. She was so... so unbelievably gorgeous like this, lit by the moonlight and the soft lamp above the bed, smooth perfect skin on display.

I wanted to give myself to her, submit to her. Do anything she wanted to. Just for tonight.

“Well, don’t just sit there gawking,” she teased, moving my hands up to her breasts. I cupped the shape of her breasts,

brushing my fingertips over her nipples, and she closed her eyes with a low, gravelly sigh. “Oh... god. Just like that. Keep going. God, I’ve needed you.”

“Me too,” I whispered without even hearing the thought in my head first—it just slipped out of its own accord. My body thrilled at the realization that it was Paisley controlling me now, not myself. She bit her lip, smiling down at me.

“That’s what I like to hear,” she murmured, pulling my hands away and tugging my shirt up over my head. She flung it onto the floor, and she moved down to my pants next, taking them and my underwear in one motion and stripping them down off me. I burned with self-consciousness and need in equal measures, but I didn’t want anything other than this.

The hungry, approving look Paisley gave me, running her gaze over my naked body—I wanted it to last forever.

“You’re so pretty, Harper,” she whispered, moving up my body again, trailing her fingertips over me as she went. “I was going to fuck you first, but seeing you like this... I think I need to get myself off first. Of course, you’re going to let me use you for it, right?”

My whole mind went blank, numb, buzzing with a dull pleasure. I felt myself nod, my breath short, and Paisley ran her finger along my lips.

“That’s what I like to see. Mm... I really need to come on your mouth. You’ll let me ride your pretty little lips, right?”

I nodded without even realizing it, my body reacting by itself. “Yes. Of course.”

“Now, now. It’s *yes, ma’am* right now.”

“Y... yes, ma’am.”

“Good girl.” She got up, off of me, and picked my shirt up off the floor, giving me a hungry look before she took hold of my wrists—she moved ever so lightly, taking them delicately, before she wrenched them up above my head. Numbing pleasure arced through my body, and I gasped, my eyes fluttering shut as she tied my wrists together with the sleeve of my shirt, the fabric soft against my skin but holding

tight. The loss of control, feeling myself helpless as Paisley slipped her pants and her underwear down together—my mind melted away into the blank bliss of surrender. Paisley slipped two fingers down between her legs, sighing as she stroked herself, coming up with her fingers wet before she slipped them between my lips. The taste of her, hot and husky on my tongue, heated up the intoxicating sensation swirling through my body. I met her gaze while I swirled my tongue around her fingers—the lust lighting up in her eyes made my whole body flush with pleasure.

“That’s what I like to see,” she murmured, slipping her fingers back out of my mouth, hoisting herself up on the bed over me. Straddling me like this, I could see her clit throbbing, pink and swollen, and it made my body tingle. “You want me to ride your pretty little mouth, don’t you, Harper?”

“Yes, ma’am.” The words slipped out without me even having to think about it.

“Good girl.” Every time she said it, it was another pulse of pleasure through my body, down to my core, down to...

She shifted herself up, and gripping me by the hair, biting her lip as she looked down at me underneath her, she lowered herself onto my face, grinding her hips against me. Her heat, her taste, overwhelmed my senses until she was the only thing that existed—the low moans she made, gripping me, rocking her hips against me. I needed her to never stop, needed her all over me...

She was certainly in no hurry either, working up faster and faster against me before backing off, on and on, sending me deeper and deeper into this mindless state of pleasure, of ecstasy. I strained against the bindings, aching to touch her, myself, anything, but they held fast, and all that existed was to pleasure her, serve her—

“Just like that,” Paisley breathed, her voice hungry, shaking, as her grip tightened. “You’re going to be a good girl and let me come on your face now.”

I felt it jolt through my body, down to my core, and I nodded desperately up at her, moving my mouth, my tongue

with her faster as she ground her hips against me. With a cry of ecstasy, she threw her head back, rocking back with one hand on the bed and one buried in my hair, pressing her hips against me, until the tension melted out of her and she relaxed, laughing lightly, breathlessly, a little wild as she came down lying on top of me, hovering above my face.

“You do so well,” she whispered, looking so perfect with her hair messy, her face flushed, light twinkling in her eyes. “Every time we do this, I can’t believe how good it feels to come on you.”

I bit my lip, hard. “Paisley...”

“Mm. You need your reward now, don’t you? Getting your pussy filled like a little fuck toy?”

Numbly, I nodded. “I... yes, ma’am.”

“You did *very* well. I think you’ve earned your reward now.” She pressed her lips to mine, pinning me down to the bed, and I arched my hips against her as she trailed a hand down my front, slipping down between my thighs.

Christ. She was fucking incredible. She hovered over my face looking me in the eye while she swirled her fingers over my clit, and I gasped, pleaded for her to fuck me, my voice wildly beyond control. She slipped two fingers inside me effortlessly with how wet I was, slid slowly deeper until I’d taken her fingers fully, and she arched them lightly against my most sensitive spot, sending pleasure jolting out through me like a live wire, sparking and jerking, before she pulled out and thrust back in again, hard enough it felt like she’d push me backwards.

She didn’t waste any time, taking me relentlessly, hungrily, giving me no time to pause or catch my breath—pleasure flooded me and I felt the edges of my vision blur as she thrust in and out, driving me higher, telling me how to take it like a good girl, like a good little toy—

I lost it when she added her mouth, sucking on my clit while she thrust in and out of me. I heard myself cry out for half a second before Paisley clamped a hand over my mouth,

and it only intensified the pleasure, sending me over the edge so hard that my vision melted away to white, my hearing gone and replaced with buzzing, my whole body falling apart into the all-consuming ecstasy of orgasm.

When she finished, coming up off of me and... out of me, she slid off the bed, untied my wrists, and collapsed back onto me, looking at me with that impossibly sweet, fond look in her eyes. I couldn't move or say anything—nothing in my body worked right now, and I didn't really want it to start working. I liked this. A lot.

“You're so pretty,” she whispered, brushing a thumb over my cheek. I let out a long, shaky breath.

“Um... d-did you know I'm into... er...”

She smiled wider. “Into what?”

“Y-you know.” I turned my head away.

“I'm not gonna know if you don't say it.”

“Being... muffled... like that.”

“Oh.” She laughed. “Um... nope! But I know now. I, uh, did it because I was pretty sure the entire rest of the park was going to hear you.”

Christ. I forgot we were in a treehouse. My face burned until there was no feeling left, just the prickling, and she rested her head on my chest, looking at me with that playful smile.

“But hey! Serendipity. Now I know. And I like knowing.”

“I, uh...” The slow realization of what we'd just done inched in, just like it had the other two times—a total bliss, a feeling like everything was right, but that aching sense somewhere far in the back of my head that this was not supposed to happen.

“Oh.” Paisley made a face. “I forgot to record it. That's a shame.”

“Oh, uh—well. I mean, we don't need to record every time...”

“Are you kidding?” She laughed. “I’d have watched the hell out of this one. God, that was so hot.”

“Um...” My face burned. I’d have, well... watched it a lot, too. I’d already touched myself far too many times to admit to the recording I had of the last time we... well.

“Go on,” Paisley said, voice light. “Say it.”

“Nothing. Just...”

She relaxed, lying on the tiny strip of bed next to me, propped up on her elbow. “You were thinking about how much you like that recording you have.”

“No!”

“Liar.”

“Ugh.” I turned my head away, blushing harder still. “I guess it was... on my mind.”

“Mm. I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve watched our first one...”

“We—probably aren’t supposed to keep doing this anyway.”

I regretted it the second I’d said it. My chest tensed, like I’d stepped out onto the fragile surface and it started to crack, and there was an aching silence for a second before Paisley snorted. “Like I’ve ever done what I’m supposed to.”

That was more of a relief than it should have been. “I mean... fair enough.”

“Do you want to take a shower, or do you just want to crash with me all over your face?”

“Um.” I flushed. “You can go first, if you want. I, uh, need a minute longer to stand up.”

“It’s so cute how you get completely wiped out.” She stood up, bending to kiss my waist an inch below my navel, and she picked her clothes up off the floor. “I’ll just be a sec, then. If you fall asleep like this, do you want me to wipe your face? As pretty as you look like that, it might be bad for your skin.”

“Just, uh, you know, wake me up and I’ll take care of it.”

“Will do.” She just about skipped to the bathroom, looking for all the world like nothing could be better in life, and my chest ached watching her.

Why couldn’t I just do that too? Just stay here, keep doing whatever Paisley and I had been doing lately, keep kissing her, keep having sex, and be happy like she was?

I knew why. I just hated it. I hated whenever I resented it, but... I was resenting it.

Chapter 16

Paisley

I sang quietly to myself as I fluffed my hair up in front of the mirror, checking my blowout, twirling in my outfit—I kind of looked like a fashion model in my sleek new high-waisted pants and fitted tank, and it really tied the whole look together when I pulled on the yellow coat that was totally my new favorite piece.

“Hey, gorgeous,” I laughed, doing another twirl in front of the mirror before I blew myself a kiss. “Oh my god. Narcissism never looked so good. Harper’s gonna love it.”

I just had to make it to the bungalow without anyone else catching me, because like... I wasn’t up to explaining this to anybody. As good as I looked, it would be embarrassing, and I’d die. So I hiked my bag up on my shoulder, slipped on my new favorite pair of heels—well, my only pair, but still—and I pushed out of the bedroom door and down the stairs, to where I instantly failed because Kay was in my living room.

“Hey—*Paisley?*” Kay clasped her hands over her face, eyes wide looking at me, and I gave her the very dignified and sensible response of throwing my bag at her face and screaming.

“Oh my god, what are you doing here!? You can’t just sneak into people’s houses!”

The bag hit Kay in the face, but she literally didn’t even care, which was unbelievable. She hurried out of the living room, eyes sparkling as she looked at me, and I wondered which window would be the best to throw myself out of. “Oh my god, is that *you?*”

“No! I’m...” I dropped my voice deeper, hunching my shoulders. “Uh... Harold.”

“You look amazing, Paisley. Oh my god, I barely even recognize you.”

I winced. “Um... really?”

She laughed, tugging lightly at my coat. “This is such a nice color on you. The material really works, too. I’d heard you went blonde, but... I didn’t know you’d had, like, a full-on glow-up.”

“Uh... I’ve been kind of keeping it on the DL.”

“You are, like, born for red lipstick. It looks amazing on you.”

Now, what was keeping Harper from complimenting me the same way? Kay needed to give her some lessons. I hunched my shoulders, looking away. “I’m gonna die of embarrassment over here. What are you even doing here?”

“Oh—I was just returning the silverware set I borrowed. Finally got my own... thanks for spotting me.” She stopped, frowning her brow. “Also, like... literally who are you to try telling people not to appear randomly in people’s houses?”

“Ugh. Knock next time. You’re worse than a mouthful of bees.”

“I *did* knock. A lot.”

I must have been singing too loud. I wondered if Kay had heard it. I’d literally die if she had, so I decided to believe she hadn’t. “Well, you’re welcome. Feel free to pay me back with discounts on bubble tea. Let me guess, you got a set in magical rainbow unicorn colors?”

Kay pouted. “They’re regular silver.”

“Really.”

“I mean... except for the dessert set.”

“I knew it. Paisley had you figured out from the start.”

Kay waved her hands wildly in front of her face. “Oh, but forget me! You look so cute! Is this what you ran off for last time? Going to go... I don’t know, go shopping, get your hair dyed, whatever you did?”

“Oh my god, leave me alone. Harper’s gonna be standing around waiting and...” I stopped, seeing the look on Kay’s

face lighting up. “Um. I mean... Harper is a metaphor in this case.”

“You’re going on a date with Harper?” She sounded close to bursting.

“No! Just... um. We’re just staying at a seaside bungalow together because it’s something she’s always wanted to try.”

She paused. “With... just the two of you. While you’re dressed like that.”

“Um. No.” The walls were closing in. Maybe I needed to knock Kay upside the head and make my getaway.

“That’s a date. Oh my god, you’re going on a date.”

“It’s not.”

“Why not?”

“Because I... said so.”

Kay made a face, sinking into a seat on the stairs. “Do you... not like her after all?”

“Well.” My heart was suddenly beating about twenty times too fast. I wished it would stop altogether.

Kay studied me carefully. “You... still don’t know?”

With a groan, I dropped onto the step next to her, pulling my knees up into my chest. “You said it’s like you can’t stop thinking about them, right? Wanting to be close to them, and touch them, and kiss them...”

She was quiet. I shot her a look.

“What kind of person has the audacity to not respond to Paisley Macleod?”

“I’m just thinking it probably means something that you remember what I said, basically word-for-word.”

“Oh. Uh.” I felt my face prickle. “No. It doesn’t.”

She tugged at my coat again. “Do you, uh... feel more like the dating type when you have this look on?”

“I don’t have a look.”

Kay blinked fast in bewilderment. “Paisley, you can’t... not have a look.”

“I’m not wearing clothes. You’re imagining it.”

“Not wearing clothes would be an even more, uh... noticeable look.”

I slumped forwards. “Ugh, we’re actually having this conversation. Can you kill me with a garden spade? Maybe douse me in lighter fluid and set me on fire first?”

“Um... no.”

“I guess I could,” I mumbled. “You know. Be more... uh... what was it I said?”

“Datey?”

“Yeah. Like—I could totally be going on a date in these shoes.”

“They are really cute. I’m a little jealous.”

“But, uh...” I shrugged. “It’s not really me, you know? I’m just putting on the look.”

She paused. “Paisley... that’s how looks generally are.”

“No, but you know what I mean, right? You could dress like a coal miner grandpa with a pipe and a faded newspaper, but you’d still be, like, unicorn rainbow baby. It would just be a costume.”

“How is *coal miner grandpa with a pipe* the first thing you get to?”

“And this is the same thing. I’m just doing this kind of thing because Harper’s going to keep it top-secret, but it’s not *me*. Just... something I’m doing.”

“Um...” She chewed her lip. “I think maybe all looks are like that, too. Something you put on, something you actively do. And they do change over time. That’s true of everyone. It doesn’t mean you have one just... naturally associated with who you are.”

I kicked idly at the stairs, just being petulant and not looking at her.

“But just for the sake of argument,” she said, “let’s pretend that you were to become this person you’re dressing up as. Would you be able to date then?”

“Well... no. It wouldn’t change, you know, like—the fundamental part of me.”

“Which is?”

“God, you ask so many questions.” I folded my arms. “Okay, okay. I, um... I guess I might have a crush on Harper? I don’t know. I guess.”

Kay’s face lit up. I wanted to run away and hide in the bushes and dig myself a hole and crawl into it and bury myself alive and die there, never to be found. “Yeah?”

“She’s just... I just like her. I don’t know. I keep thinking about her, and I want to be close to her and touch her and kiss her. So I guess I fulfill all the criteria. So... there. That’s that, I guess. Can I go now?”

Kay laughed, standing up and offering a hand, helping me up with her. “I’m really excited for you. That’s a big realization to come to. So... are you going to tell her? Because I bet she’d love to make this... mysterious unnamed outing into an actual date.”

I folded my arms, looking away. “Ugh. It’s complicated, okay? We don’t need labels and stuff, we can just keep kissing and things.”

Kay looked like she’d just won a million magical unicorn dollars. “*Keep kissing?*”

“Oh. Uh.”

“You kissed Harper.”

“No! Not even once.”

“Multiple times?”

I waved my hands frantically. “Never! I would never kiss her. Or anyone!”

“When did you kiss her?”

“Oh my god, you are so not listening to me!”

“Did she kiss you back?”

“No! Because, uh... there was no kiss to begin with.”

Her face fell. “Oh... she didn’t?”

“No—it’s not that. Um...” I put a hand over my face, sinking against the wall. “Oh my god. Okay. I did. And she did. And that’s the last thing you’re getting from me on the subject. We’re not dating. Just let a girl kiss her friend sometimes. That’s it. End of story. Fin. Kaput.”

She hugged me. I groaned, resigning myself to hugging her back. Nobody suffered like Paisley Macleod suffered.

“You two are so cute,” she laughed. “I’m really happy for you!”

“You are not listening.”

She stepped back from the hug, eyes shining. “Do you want to go shopping together?”

“No! I have a date.”

She smiled. I scowled.

“Dammit.”

“I don’t mean right now,” she laughed. “In general. You know I love clothes and fashion and stuff. I would literally love it so much if I got to help you, you know, style up, find your look.”

I was suddenly so self-conscious it felt like my skin would all up and crawl away. I hugged myself tightly, suddenly really fascinated with the leaves outside the window. “Um... I think you’d be disappointed.”

“What? Disappointed how?”

“Just, you know.”

She waited a while before she said, “Um... typically you’re supposed to follow that up with what the actual answer is.”

“You’re so stodgy.”

“*Stodgy?*”

“I told you this isn’t really *me*. And I don’t know what I’m doing.”

She swatted my arm. “Oh my god, you dork, that’s literally why I’m offering. I can give advice and stuff! I know clothes better than you, and you know your likes better than me. Two heads are better than one!”

“Um. Maybe.” I scratched my head. “You’re not going to tell anyone, right? I’ll have you disappear if you do.”

“No need for mafia-esque threats, I’m not telling a soul.” Her expression softened. “Relax. I get that this is a big step for you. And I’m super, super excited for you. Both, you know, changing up your style, and your date with—”

“There’s no date and I’ve gotta go,” I said, turning and heading out the door. Kay shouted something behind me, but it turned out that when I had to go, heels were no impediment to Paisley Macleod—I sprinted over the pavement and didn’t slow down until I was at the end of the street, turning the corner and disappearing.

I texted Harper on my way, walking with my head down so nobody would see my face and realize. *i’m sorryyyyyy i got held up!!! out the door running rn*

I’d kind of expected you’d just forgotten about this and were playing tennis

hey!!! i don’t have the attention span of a coked-up fruit fly

It wasn’t too long, thankfully, before I got to walk under the creaky old wooden archway and onto the boardwalk to where Harper was leaning against the rail, looking out over the water. The boards creaked underfoot, and she turned to look at me, her lips parting, eyes widening a fraction.

Ugh. The dork. As if she hadn’t seen me in my nice clothes. We’d kicked a couple of buckets since the treehouse—or whatever the saying was—and had a happy week of sneaky

little rendezvous, but she still looked at me like she was seeing something rare and incredible. And I, uh, didn't want her to stop doing that literally ever.

Of course, she'd stop once she left Bayview. But I threw the thought into a big, heavy box and padlocked it shut.

"Hey, loser," I said, walking over to her side. "I'm sure you were on the edge of your seat waiting for the VIP—"

"You styled your hair differently."

"Oh. Uh." I nudged it, suddenly self-conscious. "I dunno, did I?"

I one hundred percent did, hoping she would comment on it. But now I was nervous about her commenting on it. What a world.

She smiled lightly, distantly, like she didn't realize she was doing it. "You did. It looks really good on you."

I felt swimmy and bubbly-happy all of a sudden, but I put my hands on my hips. "See? It's not that hard to compliment me when you see me."

She flinched, only just realizing she had complimented me, and she looked away. "I just... er... forget it. Let's get going. My feet are killing me from standing around all day."

"I was four minutes late. You run a bakery. You've been on your feet more than four minutes at a time."

"Suddenly I can't hear you."

"Hey!" I jogged to catch up as she started away, walking alongside her. "You don't want to play that game. You know how loud I can raise my voice."

She laughed, and we settled into easy conversation, small talk, as we walked under the softening dusk that spilled from the horizon and over the water. It was pretty, casting the ocean in all shades of orange and deep vermilion, with a cool breeze blowing in over the water, and all I could think was that it was really awfully romantic.

This was what people did, right? Take the girl you liked out on a date to walk on the boardwalk together, head to a special place to spend some time together with just the two of you. You'd watch the stars come out over the ocean, hold hands, and stare deep into one another's eyes. And all of that sounded... nice, with Harper.

So why didn't I just say I liked her? Why did it feel like I had cotton balls jammed down my throat?

The bungalow was a cute little colonial-style thing jutting out over the water, past all the shops and where the boardwalk weaved through little resort houses, and Harper led me up to the front door, salmon-pink with a shiny gold number and doorhandle. She punched in a code on the keypad by the door, and she pushed the door open when it clicked.

"Home sweet home," she said. "For a night, at least."

"Oh my god, it's so cute," I laughed, hurrying inside ahead of her, into where the living room was all dressed up with pastel pink and blues, and even a little snack buffet set up on the limestone countertop into the galley-style kitchen. The wall was all windows out onto the water, a glass door leading out onto a rear deck, and the view was just unbelievable. Maybe the sunrise from a place like this was worth waking up early for.

"I am honestly impressed how well you move in heels," Harper said, stepping inside behind me and shutting the door.

"Oh." I looked down at my feet. "I kinda forgot I was wearing them."

"Unbelievable. To think Paisley Macleod, rather than her sister, is the one who's so comfortable in heels she forgets she's wearing them."

I flushed, suddenly self-conscious. "Leave my sister out of this."

"All right. I said nothing. Just that they suit you well." She took off her shoes and coat at the door, hanging her bag up before she came over and dropped down on the cozy couch, faded from use, sand-brown to match the sisal rug. She looked

cute in a light blouse, mint-green, and it only really dawned on me then as I was sitting down next to her that she didn't normally wear colors, let alone pastels.

The idea of her dressing up for me was kind of... it made my throat feel tight, and I wasn't emotionally ready to ask myself why.

"Thank you," I said, finally, flexing my feet out. "I make anything look good."

"Going to start a collection of high heels?"

I stuck my tongue out. "Maybe. What are you going to do, fight me over it?"

"Somehow that wasn't what I was thinking."

"Well, boo. Maybe you should fight more often."

"How'd you get held up?"

I cleared my throat. "Um... Kay caught me."

She looked far too amused. I was going to fight her. "Oh, I'm sure that was fun."

"Close your mouth. Ugh. She would not let me go."

"But she loved your style, I'm assuming."

"Well..." I flopped back in the couch, feeling the cold air of the AC nip at my ears a little, staring out over the foreverness of the ocean ahead of us. "I guess so."

She sank back on the couch next to me, letting out a long sigh, before she stood up suddenly. "Oh, before I forget. I brought the strawberry shandy you like."

"Just for me? Oh my god, you're an angel."

"No. Just for me. I'm going to drink them all in front of you."

"Hey!" I shot her a withering glare as she came back from where she hung up her bag, a cooler pouch in hand. "You're a monster. You wouldn't dream of doing me dirty like that."

“Not on my life. I’d wake up with my throat slit.” She pulled a can of the pink-and-green shandy out, handing it to me, and took one out for herself, kicking her feet up on the table as she cracked the top, taking a long swig. I popped mine open, too, drinking in the sweet bliss, and I let out a satisfied sigh that, on reflection, sounded a little more like a moan. Harper looked away.

“Oh my god, it’s amazing,” I said. “You’re the best in the world.”

“Emberlynn let me have the extras after Sunday, so... I didn’t really do anything.”

“You’re insufferable. Take a compliment.”

“So... how are you feeling with somebody else knowing about your secret identity?”

“Ugh.” I knocked back another sip of the shandy. “She was nice about it, just... a lot...”

“Let me guess. She offered to take you shopping because she’s too excited to sit still.”

“Got it in one.”

“Going to do it?”

“I... guess?” I felt my face burn. “I don’t know. It feels weird.”

“It feels like then it’s too real?”

I paused. “I... yeah, maybe.”

“Like you’ve been experimenting with this thing secretly, in private. You’ve been able to liberate yourself a bit because you feel like you’re in a safe space to experiment. But if somebody else is there... not to mention Kay’s a bit of a blabbermouth.”

“Yeah.” I sank back in the couch, watching out the window as the water rolled in light waves. “Yeah, pretty much. It feels like then I’m supposed to be doing a... um, she said a glow-up, so I’m just running with that. Like I’m supposed to be doing a glow-up, and doing it correctly.”

“You don’t have to go with her to do anything. But if you do, you also don’t have to do it in any kind of way. It should just be fun.”

I shifted closer to her side. Any amount of distance between us suddenly felt like too much, and I just wanted to wrap myself around her and hold her tight, like we could become one. Was that also a sign that I had feelings for her? Who did that, anyway? I wasn’t ready to be such a cliché. “I guess you’re right,” I mumbled. “You’re kind of smart, sometimes.”

“For one who complains about me not giving compliments, you certainly don’t give compliments.”

I buried my face in her shoulder. “You know, I think you’re really beautiful...”

She flinched like I’d thrown something at her. “Hold on. Oh, god. No, I wasn’t asking for compliments.”

I pouted, turning away. “Oh, I see. You don’t like me thinking you’re beautiful. Well, then I’ll just go somewhere else.”

“No—oh my god, Pais, don’t be difficult.” She latched onto my wrist, and it seemed to slow time down, just... sitting there, her hand on my wrist, the ocean rolling out in front of us, me and Harper side-by-side. Slowly, I shifted back against her side, and with my heart pounding in my chest, I let myself rest my head on her shoulder. It just... felt right. Like I just fit perfectly there, slotting in just right.

Harper slipped her hand down until it linked with mine, and somehow or other, our fingers interlaced. How about that?

“You know,” I said, at length, “this is the second bucket with an overnight stay. Is this just a cry for help saying you need more sleep?”

“I didn’t think so, but I wouldn’t be surprised if on some level...”

I sighed, squeezing her hand, pressing myself firmly into her, and I heard myself let out a frustrated grunt. “I hate you with the fire of a thousand suns.”

“Paisley, hating me because I like to sleep.”

“Not that. Just...” I closed my eyes. “I wish you weren’t leaving...”

She drew in a sharp breath, and I knew I was supposed to regret saying it, but what the hell. I never did anything I was supposed to.

Finally, though, she let out a small sigh. “Me too.”

“Then stay.” The words tumbled out of me. She looked away.

“I’m... afraid I have to go.”

“Why? Your career is doing just fine here. The bakery is great. And doing better all the time! You could just start hiring people. That would be a huge step up. I bet—”

“I have to, Paisley. This is the way forward. Forward and up.”

“Why?” I pulled away from her, turning on her with that fire burning inside me, aching with the injustice of *why* she couldn’t just stay with me, *why* I wasn’t enough. “Is that really the most important thing? Like... just this arbitrary measure of *the right way to progress*? This whole ridiculous status thing? That’s what’s most important? That’s what’s going to make you happy?”

“It’s not about being happy,” she blurted, and I stopped, frowning.

She wouldn’t look at me, her gaze fixed squarely on the floor.

The silence suddenly felt oppressive, just the AC murmuring at the edge of the room, the distant sound of waves lapping past the doors. Slowly, I shifted closer to her. “Then... what in the world is it about?”

She sighed, hard, looking away. “I... I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Harper.” This time it was my turn to latch onto her wrist as she tried to pull away. “Stop running, dammit. Talk to me.”

“I would rather not.”

“Too bad.”

She hung her head. “I just... have a... duty. To do this.”

“A *duty*? To who? It didn’t even make you happy when you got first place in that contest. Who were you even doing it for?”

“It was... I...” She pinched the bridge of her nose, massaging gently. “I’m not supposed to be talking about this. You don’t need to hear me complaining.”

“Tell me or I scream.”

“It’s *you*. The whole world will know if I tell you.”

It stung like a barb, but I knew she didn’t mean it. Just lashing out defensively. I squeezed her hand. “Harper. You know I can keep a secret.”

“Yeah. No. Sorry. I just...” She shook her head, and she took a long swig of her drink before she set it down hard, hunching forward. “All you need to know is that I’m doing it for someone. Okay?”

It felt like she’d torn my chest open and ripped my heart out. I found myself left aching and empty, and the numb sensation gave way to a burning feeling in my chest, through my face, out to my ears. “Who?” I said, trying to sound casual. “Some cutie out there thinking of you?”

“No—it’s not that.”

“Are they waiting for you there? Is that what this is?”

“She’s not waiting for me *anywhere*, she’s dead,” she blurted, and she screwed up her face as the air suddenly felt cold, unfamiliar. I watched her for a second before I softened.

“Oh... I... I’m sorry.”

“Shit, I didn’t mean to say that,” she groaned, rubbing her forehead. “Christ. I wanted this to be nice. You and me and just...”

“Harper...” My throat was so tight I couldn’t breathe right. A hot sensation pressed into my skull. What else had Harper never told me? How little did I actually know her?

She turned away, sucking in a sharp breath. “I’m sorry. I just... I need a minute.”

“Wait,” I said, and—the jerk had the nerve not to listen to Paisley Macleod, of all people, because she slipped into the bathroom and shut the door behind her, closing me into the silence of the living room alone.

Chapter 17

Harper

My hands shook as I assessed the situation, a sick feeling in my mouth. Her name was an echo in my head, bouncing inside my skull, damning me on repeat.

Lindsay.

I'd worked so damn hard not letting myself think it. It must have been a year, easy, since I'd last thought the name. It felt like the walls closed in tighter around me, like the floor pitched, and like I could feel her eyes on me. I gripped the edges of the sink tightly, my hands aching from the tension.

Leave it to Paisley to be the one to finally dredge it up again. To see all the walls I'd built up and politely step over all of them right to the raw, bleeding center of my heart.

The girl knew me a little too well. I was starting to think she saw through me better than Priscilla.

My reflection in the mirror looked back at me through haunted, bloodshot eyes. I was a different person all of a sudden—like I was seeing Lindsay's face looking at me all over again.

Enough. I wasn't sure if I'd thought it forcefully or if it had actually slipped out, if I'd started talking to myself in an empty bathroom. It didn't matter, though. Paisley had left—I'd heard the door unlatch and creak open before swinging shut, and I'd sat with the sick, sinking feeling of loneliness so heavy, so real, it was a palpable weight in my throat.

Enough. I chanted it back to myself, whether it was real or in my head. I couldn't spend my whole life like this. I was pulling it together. I was being an adult. She'd be disappointed if she saw where I'd ended up.

I pulled away from the mirror and stepped back out into the bungalow, and I found my feet walking me out to the rear deck, sinking into the chair at the end of the thatched roof and

watching the waves. The endlessness of the ocean reminded me how small I was. It was relaxing, reassuring, to lose myself in that—to see some scale beyond me and know that all of this I was swimming in was only a drop in the ocean. And it was with my mind in a slightly better place that I managed to pull up my phone, seeing Emberlynn’s text.

checked into your little staycation spot?

I forced out a shaky breath, making myself type a reply. The act of putting words together was like a lens, refocusing my consciousness, realigning me until things made a little more sense again. *pais told you?*

Kay.

I laughed awkwardly. I’d honestly forgotten Paisley had even mentioned Kay. The conversation was a blur. *guess everyone’s hearing about it sooner or later with her in the equation...*

she’s not exactly a master spy... I’m so confused how she hid her sexuality from her parents And then before I could reply, a shorter message. *Are you dating Paisley?*

It felt like a tight grip around my throat. Whatever Paisley and I had been over this last week, we weren’t anymore. I blew up. Drove her away. A fun date got less fun when you brought up ghosts.

Should have just let myself enjoy them as dates. Should have known circumstances would pull us apart anyway, so why would it even matter?

Not really sure how to put it into a text, I hesitated for a long time before I called Emberlynn, and the call went through with a *click*.

“I’m leaving,” I heard myself say.

She paused. “The—the bungalow thing? What, you only rented it for fifteen minutes?”

Had it only been fifteen minutes? I glanced at the clock on my phone before I realized, embarrassingly slowly, it was just a manner of speaking. I was turning into Pais. “Bayview.”

“Oh, what? When? Where are you going?”

She didn't realize what I meant. I breathed in long and slow. I should have backed out—not even sure how I'd ended up here—but I found I couldn't. “End of April. To New York. New job. New... horizons, I guess.”

“Oh...” Emberlynn's voice trailed off into a little whisper, and we hung there in the tension of the pause for what seemed like forever. “Oh, you mean you're *leaving* leaving.”

I nodded. Not that she could see it, but... I couldn't find any words right now. The silence was words enough.

“And... Crystal Lights?”

“Closing.” I swallowed a few times to get past the dryness in my mouth. “Just... don't tell anyone. Please. I'm working on... working on telling everyone. I'll get to it. Maybe at the festival.”

“Damn, Harps,” she said, her voice low. “How long have you known?”

“December.” The word came out bitterly, guilt sinking deep into my bones, but Emberlynn's reply was softer than I thought. Softer than I deserved.

“You've been carrying it by yourself since then, huh?”

I swallowed hard, blinking away the burning at my eyes. “Most of that time. Paisley knows. Broke into my house, got into my computer, and read my emails.”

“Oh my god. I guess that's Paisley for you...”

“So... no,” I said, my voice dry, gravelly, as I looked down, toeing the floorboards, the water's surface visible in the thin lines between boards. “Not dates. Paisley is just taking me around... seeing everything Bayview has to offer before I leave.”

She paused. After a long, loaded silence, she said, “She couldn't get you to stay, huh?”

“That’s not what it’s about.” Something seared in the back of my mind, though—a hazy memory dredged up from the conversation, ten minutes ago or twelve hours ago, I couldn’t tell. Paisley wishing I weren’t leaving. Me agreeing.

“You... you know she cares about you, though.”

Emberlynn and her girlfriend were both on the same page, unsurprisingly. Both here to rub it in my face, insisting Paisley was head-over-heels for me. “I doubt that.”

She cleared her throat. “Do you, really?”

“I really, really do. If she had feelings for me, she could show them somehow other than climbing into my window to steal my food.”

“And making out with you doesn’t count?”

I fumbled the phone. “Er—what do you mean?”

“I wonder,” she said flatly.

I cleared my throat, suddenly awkward. They *were* best friends. I guess it wasn’t a surprise if... “What did Pais tell you, exactly?”

“Enough to know you’re being a little evasive.” Still, she said it gently, sweetly—something in her voice so soft and caring. The tone of someone who was calling me out because she wanted me to be true to myself, not because she felt entitled to the truth. Emberlynn was too good. Bayview was too good.

I looked down at the floor. “I think... maybe she does. You know—care about me, like that. But I don’t think she knows she does. Aria told me the same thing, and I think she’s right.”

She hesitated. “But you don’t...?”

I tightened my grip on the phone. “What does it matter?”

“It matters,” she said, softly, sweetly. Not correcting, but... comforting. “Even if you leave and you never see her again, it’s a disservice to yourself if you lie about it. You’d have to grieve the loss of not only a friend, but a lover. And if

you never let yourself acknowledge the grief as that, then you'll never process it.”

I slumped backwards in the chair, kicking my feet up on the ottoman, casting my gaze up to where the end of the roof cut a jagged edge against cloudy blue skies. Her words sank into me like caramel into a batter, slowly against the surface until it was enveloped and suddenly I couldn't tell where her words ended and my feelings began.

“Dammit,” I said, quietly.

“I'm not letting you hide from your feelings. I appreciate you too much to.”

“I wish you would.”

“Well, find a magic star to wish upon, because I'm not playing.”

I laughed, a small and hollow sound, and I took a second just looking for words—looking for anything I could say—but I jumped when the door flung open behind me, and I turned with my heart in my mouth as Paisley made a beeline from the door for me, and she draped herself over the edge of the chair and, unceremoniously, she took my phone, holding it up to her ear.

“Hey,” she said, putting on a deep voice. “This is Harper's manager. Who has the audacity to be calling her while she's out of office?”

“*Paisley*,” I hissed, snatching for the phone, but I couldn't deny the incredible weight that came off my chest just... seeing her here. Seeing her come back.

Paisley made a face at the phone. “Emberlynn? Ugh. I was expecting someone interesting.”

Emberlynn's voice coming down the phone didn't sound thrilled. Paisley caught my hand as I reached for the phone—the woman had reflexes on another level.

“What were you gossiping with Harps about?” she said idly. “I swear, I step out for, like, five minutes to grab cake and you steal my girl.”

My stomach dropped, my face prickling. “Oh my god, Paisley. Will you give me my phone back?”

Paisley gave a horrified look at the phone. “You’re not telling *me* the gossip? *Me*? Paisley Macleod? The divine incarnation of the very ideal of gossip itself? You... you... a curse upon your lineage!”

Paisley hung up, handing the phone back to me, pouting.

“She wouldn’t tell me the gossip,” she said.

“I... put that together.” I stood up. “And you hung up my call.”

“Mm-hm. There’s a more important girl here now.” She took my hands, tugging me back towards the bungalow. “C’mon. I got dessert. Unless you’d rather hang with Emberlynn looking all sad, I guess...”

“Is that why you went out?” I said, my face burning as I let her lead me by the hand back inside. I had no idea what I was supposed to think right now—seeing her like this, still dressed up for me, wondering if it meant anything that she’d come back. That I cared this much that she did. “To get cake?”

“Well, ostensibly. Then I got distracted for a minute. And I ended up getting pie instead. But just c’mon! It’s a French silk pie. I know you like them.”

I did. And as I joined her at the bar counter by the window, taking bites out of it while Paisley talked about nothing, I enjoyed it a little too much. Even if it left me burning, floating in limbo.

Maybe we just weren’t talking about it. Paisley said she *got distracted*, but I knew her. If she actually got distracted, she’d talk for half an hour about what she got distracted with. She needed a minute alone. I needed a minute alone.

And we’d both given it the space we needed to be able to pretend nothing had happened. That I hadn’t said anything I wasn’t supposed to. And it was such a relief that I wanted to cry, wanted to cling to her, except... well, that would be a bit unlike me.

After the sunlight disappeared off the ocean and the stars came out twinkling at the horizon where the waves met the sky, Paisley led me to the bedroom door, where I got a start at the sight—it was a beautiful room, soft blues and whites, and a four-poster queen bed draped with a light, lacy canopy, facing a full-wall window overlooking the water. A little too... romantic to be staying in as just friends.

Paisley, of course, didn't hesitate, taking me by the hand and leading me towards the bed before she collapsed into it, patting on the bed to gesture me to join her. I raised my eyebrows, playing it cool.

"You're a bit overdressed for going to bed, don't you think?"

She grinned, and my thoughts went careening when—not a drop of hesitation, she pulled the skirt up on her dress, tugging it up her waist. The deep jade green underwear she had on was a bit too... nice to be regular underwear. "What, want me less dressed?"

"No! I mean—I was—"

She laughed, eyes sparkling, as she dropped her skirt back down. "You're so cute when you blush. Come on, you goof," she said, and she grabbed me between two buttons on my blouse, pulling me into bed with her. "I want to cuddle. And you're going to oblige."

"Oh—decided that for me, huh?"

"Like that's new for me?"

It wasn't like I didn't want to, embarrassingly. And my heart was still pounding at the thought of Paisley's... well, what she was wearing. And whether she'd stop wearing it.

I couldn't be like this after just having been thinking about *that name*. But I was putting it out of my mind anyway, as far as it would go.

Paisley won the battle of wills, to no one's great surprise. I ended up tangled up in the bed next to her, wrapped up in each other's arms, her head on my arm and lying lightly on my

collar, and I felt my heart beat slow, breathing in the faint scent of her. And...

“Are you wearing perfume?”

“I think it’s supposed to be cologne, technically, but... who cares? I like it.”

Sandalwood, maybe? Something woodsy, complex, faintly sweet. I could get used to it...

“It’s nice,” I said softly. “It suits you.”

“Mm.” She nuzzled her face against my collar. “See how easy it is to compliment me properly?”

“I love seeing how... good you feel in the clothes you’ve been wearing recently. You’re gorgeous. And there’s this... sparkle you have like you actually know that you are. It’s really breathtaking.”

She giggled lightly against me. It drove me out of my damn mind how perfect she was—small and sweet and precious, pulled tight against me, our bodies flush together. “Better,” she said. “You’re on a roll.”

“Hey—” I pulled away a little, meeting her eyes. “Did you go out dressed like that to buy a pie?”

“No, I shed all my clothes in a bush and went naked.”

“Please. You are the one person that sounds like a credible threat from.”

She laughed, but she avoided my gaze. “Yup. Bumped into Chris Danson there. And you know what that asshole did?”

“Tell me?”

“He didn’t even compliment me! Asked if I was out on a date but didn’t even tell me I looked good!”

I laughed, something in my chest that I couldn’t name, couldn’t give voice to. She was showing people. Getting more comfortable dressing like she wanted, letting people see. Maybe that was another part of the... happy legacy I could leave here. Something good I could leave in my wake.

“Well,” I said, “sounds like he’s on the list now. Enemy of the people.”

“You can say that again,” she said, and then, like it was the most natural thing in the world—and I think it probably was—she kissed me. Sank against me, her lips finding mine, and I didn’t want to fight it.

I wanted her. And I think she wanted me. Tomorrow didn’t matter. Today did. I kissed her, long and slow and sweet, and I let everything else fade away.

Chapter 18

Paisley

Aria had the absolute nerve to be standing in the way when I barreled for the door, and she only narrowly managed to step to the side so I didn't plow into her with my armload of snacks.

"Oh my god," I said. "*You*. What are you doing in my way?"

She smiled lightly. "Walking into my own house, as far as I see it."

"And who gave you the right?" I glanced over my shoulder. The living room was clean. Guess that made sense.

"You forgot this was our house."

"Well... details. Anyway, move your butt, I'm hanging out with Harps."

"Mm-hm. With all of Emberlynn's and my snacks, from the looks of things."

"Ugh! I just needed pretzels. I left the half a custard pie I couldn't finish in the fridge as a tribute."

Aria put her hands up, palms toward the ceiling. "Then I guess we're having custard pie. So..." She trailed off, a look in her eyes that I couldn't read, and it was awfully rude of her to keep something from me—*me*, Paisley.

I scowled. "Your rotten girlfriend is rubbing off on you. You're giving me that same look she does when she won't spit something out. I know that's not something you've always done."

"Ah. How about that? Well, she's always been quite the charismatic person. No surprise she's able to rub off on people like that."

Well, she didn't just rub off on her, she also rubbed her off this morning when I had the horrible misfortune of being awake. Of course, I guess it was on me for being up that late, but I didn't like the idea of anything ever being my fault, so I put that thought away. "Just spit it out," I said.

"So, things are going well with Harper?"

Oh, here was one conversation I didn't need. I considered throwing myself out the window. "Yeah, I got her to start rewatching some old episodes of Buffy with me, so, you know, life's good."

"Hm." She smiled wider, and there was something there—something knowing. She wasn't supposed to be *like* this, knowing things about me. It felt kind of gross and scary. "That's your love language, then? Buffy the Vampire Slayer?"

I wrinkled my nose. "If you're getting at *love language* like a lover, then, like... ew, Ar."

She laughed softly. "Really, though. You do like her, don't you?"

"Oh my god, let me eat my snacks."

"She's the one you've been dressing up for lately, right?"

I scoffed. "Paisley doesn't need to have this conversation," I said, making a move for the door, but she stepped in front of it, blocking me. "Hey! You can't block my own door!"

"Good thing I'm not, then. You know, you can't have something real, meaningful with people if you hide all the things that make you *you*."

Oh, she was hitting me right where it hurt. I rolled my eyes. "You're the worst. Harper's waiting for me, you know."

"I mean it. You can't form a serious connection with somebody unless you're willing to be..." She put up a hand, searching for words. "Tacky? A little uncool? And a little human."

I sighed, dropping my shoulders. "Ar..."

“Yes?”

“I left the sink running in the bathroom, by the way.”

She glanced to the side, looking at where the bathroom door was ajar, and I took the golden opportunity to climb out the window, dropping the bag of pretzels in the process. Behind me, I heard Aria shouting my name, but I was above having to listen to my own sister, so I scrabbled in the bush and grabbed the pretzels and booked it across the street to Harper’s, brushing the leaves and twigs off my coat.

I went around to the back and tried the door, but it was locked—why this woman kept locking her door, I had no idea—so I jimmed the window open, and I was halfway through climbing in when I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I jumped so hard I almost dropped the snacks.

“Paisley,” Harper said, her voice dry. “Please just knock.”

“Jesus, you scared me. *Knock?* You could have been upstairs, in the bathroom, anything. You think I want to wait?” I huffed, pulling my second leg through the window and shoving my snacks into Harper’s hands. She was dressed casually today, loose pants and a sleeveless tank over a sports bra, showing off the sleeve tattoos she had down each arm, and honestly, I’d never realized I would go for a girl with tats like Harps.

Harper sighed, shoving her hand in her pocket and rummaging around. “That does it,” she said. “You’ve broken in through the window for the last time, and I’m done.”

I stuck my tongue out. “What are you gonna do, tase me?”

“I’m tempted.” She pulled out a keychain instead, two keys jingling on it, and she thrust it towards me. “I copied the keys to the building. Please. Just... just use the doors instead. I’m begging you.”

I felt something thick in my throat as I took the keys. “Harper,” I said. “Asking me to move in with you? That’s so romantic.”

“All I’m saying—” Harper blurted, her face reddening. She was so cute like this, I couldn’t stand it. I wanted to kiss her again.

“Hey, I’m saying yes.”

“Uh—” She stammered, blanking on words, blushing harder. I pushed the keys into my pocket, strolling past her.

“We’re basically married now,” I hummed. “C’mon, wifey. Let’s get to our show.”

“P-Paisley. I just want you to stop climbing onto my roof.”

“Hey, you have to have one wife who climbs the roof to fix the shingles.”

“I don’t even have shingles! And—have you ever done roofing a day in your life?”

I paused at the base of the stairs, beaming at her. “Whatever you say, sweetheart. Do you want to watch a show with me or stand here in an empty room while I eat your snacks?”

She hung her head, following along behind me with her shoulders hunched. “You’re so incorrigible,” she muttered, and really, I was just upset she kept her face down so I couldn’t see her blush. I was tempted to just take her by the chin and tilt her back up to look at me, but... well, we’d probably be down here all day if I did.

And then I’d never get to sit on the couch with my wife and watch Buffy, and if that wasn’t torture, I didn’t know what was.

I busied myself making coffee once we got upstairs, Harper setting up the show, and I dropped myself on the couch next to her as she started up the episode we’d left off on yesterday. I cuddled up next to her, feeling impossibly like I could not get close enough no matter how hard I tried, and we weren’t five minutes into the episode before I had both arms wrapped around her, my head tucked into the crook of her neck, one leg crossed over hers possessively. It was like every little bit of pulling her closer to me made my heart so full, and

I was addicted, just wanting all I could get. It was halfway through the episode when I found myself idly kissing her bare shoulder just below the hem of her shirt, and she murmured something softly as she melted back into me.

I kind of wondered if this was what having a wife *was* like in the first place. I kept my attention only half-focused on the show, peppering kisses lightly on the back of her head, on her neck, caressing the soft skin of her arm.

If it was, then having a wife sounded pretty cool. My parents definitely didn't do this, though. I wondered if you just stopped wanting to after a while. Hard to wrap my head around. I could have kept doing this with Harps forever.

Once the end credits of the episode were rolling, Harper murmured, "I didn't say it, but you look cute today. That's a new shirt?"

"Mm-hm. Kay said the color's nice. And works with my coat, too."

"I have noticed you're fond of the coat."

"It's a signature piece. Don't complain that your wife is fashionable."

"I'm not," she laughed. "I like the lip color today too."

"Oh, yeah. It's the same one I wore to Honey's." I laughed lightly, kissing her neck again. "Well, I got my own this time. That time I just swiped Emby's."

"You used Emberlynn's lipstick? I'd feel like I was making out with someone if I used their lipstick..."

"Ew." I wrinkled my nose. "Don't put that thought in my head. Gross. Gag. I'm not cheating on my wife."

"Mm. Good." She rested her head against me, murmuring softly, and I felt like my chest would explode. We physically could not get any closer, but I kind of... needed her closer.

The next episode came and went. I paid even less attention to this one, too busy sneaking a hand under Harper's

shirt, trailing patterns around her navel, peppering her with kisses without even realizing I was doing it.

And then at the ending credits of the next episode, I stepped in it, because I heard myself say, “Was it a girlfriend?”

“What?”

“Friend? Wife?”

I felt the moment it sank in what I was asking, her muscles tensing. I felt a hot flush of something like guilt.

“I feel like I’m losing my mind not knowing something so big about you.”

She swallowed hard. Her voice was smaller, icier when she spoke. “I think there’s a lot of things you don’t know about me.”

“Then tell me.”

“I can’t.”

“Please? I want to know you...”

She hunched her shoulders, pulling away from me. I ached for her back, feeling like it was half my heart pulling away from me. The episode ended, and she took the remote to move onto the next episode immediately. I sighed.

“I’m sorry. I take it back.”

“It’s whatever,” she said, her voice cold.

“It’s not whatever. I don’t want to make you sad.”

She didn’t say anything. I shifted closer to her again, putting an arm around her waist.

“You know. Happy wife, happy life.”

“I’m not your wife, Paisley.”

“How could anyone not want to be my wife? Look at me.”

She sighed, hanging her head. “Christ, Pais, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be so touchy. I just... I don’t like talking about this.”

“That’s okay. You don’t need to tell me anything,” I said, resting my head on her shoulder again. “I still love you.”

I told her I loved her all the time—you know, in between telling her I hated her—but somehow the words felt so scary right now, and it quivered a little in my throat when I did. I felt it tense, nervous in the air, before she sank into me too. “Yeah, yeah... I love you too,” she said, and it felt every bit as scary when she said it, too.

But it felt right, too. And I couldn’t breathe without her close to me.

We settled back in against one another as the next episode started, slipping my hand up under her shirt and caressing lightly along her waist, kissing softly along her arm and her shoulders and her neck, until one way or another, Harper was lying on her back with me on top of her, watching the show less and less as I kissed her collar, her neck, her jaw. Her lips.

I hadn’t even been trying to, but I couldn’t resist her. I slipped my lips against hers, kissing slowly, caressing her sides, tangling my hands in her hair, kissing—she wrapped her legs around me, murmuring something soft against my lips, slipping her hands up the back of my shirt, and it drove me absolutely wild. Like I had to kiss her, even though I already was—like I needed to kiss her *more*, impossibly more.

When I took her lower lip lightly between mine, she murmured a soft moan, digging her fingertips into my back, before she pulled back, her face flushed and a breathless smile on her lips.

“You’re the one who harassed me into putting the show on, and I don’t think you’ve watched a single minute of it.”

“I’ve been enjoying a different show.” I stuck my tongue out, propping up on an elbow and tracing my fingertips along her collar. “Like... how cute my wife looks in casualwear.”

She closed her eyes with a breathless sigh. “You mean when I dress like a slob.”

“You look cute like this. Honestly. You could take a load off and stop worrying about how you come across all the time, but what do I know.”

“Mm... not really an option.”

“It is if I tell you...” I trailed my hands down her sides, taking the hem of her shirt between my fingers. “Exactly... what to do. And of course, you’ll do whatever I say. Won’t you, Harper?”

She turned her head, looking away, blushing hard. “I’m not... Paisley...”

“Now, now.” I took her by the chin, tilting her back to look at me, and she caught a shuddering gasp. The rush at controlling her flooded me with this heady sensation that always got out of control, but... I didn’t want to fight it. I bit my lip. “You look at me. Until I tell you to look away. Be a good girl, Harper.”

She swallowed hard, and with a quiet whimper, she nodded. Heat stirred in my abdomen, an aching urge to use her for all the fantasies I had. We’d already had sex at the bungalow and the other day in her bakery after hours, but I was finding I couldn’t get enough of her.

“Good girl,” I said. “Take your shirt off now. I want to see you.”

She didn’t even hesitate. She *was* a good girl. Her hands shook a little, but she reached down and tugged her shirt up, dropping it onto the floor. I bit my lip, taking her in—the soft, smooth skin of her stomach, the dip in her hips, the contrast between the lightly tanned tone of her skin and the jet-black ink of her tattoos running along her shoulders and tapering off at her collar.

“Hands up above your head,” I said, and she complied, quickly, obediently. She didn’t try to argue *we shouldn’t do this* anymore—just did what she was told. God, it was addictive.

I bent down and kissed her waist, softly, delicately, savoring the way she jerked her hips up against me at the

feathery lightness of the touch. She whimpered, pleading my name under her voice, and I looked up to meet her eyes while I dragged my tongue slowly up along her. She bit her lip hard, and I loved the look of lust flaring in her eyes.

“You need this, don’t you?” I whispered, moving my hand to tease over her inner thigh. She closed her eyes with a low moan, rocking her hips against me, and I savored the moment of Harper desperate, searching for friction, me not quite giving her anything, before I grabbed her roughly by the thighs and spread them wider. She let out a small cry, digging her fingernails into the sofa on either side of her.

“Paisley—”

“Mm. You look so pretty getting so desperate for me.” I pressed a kiss against the front of her pants, feeling the heat of her core burning through the fabric, warm on my lips, and she gasped at the touch.

“Oh my god—”

“You want me to fuck you, don’t you, Harper?”

“I...” She looked away, face burning. I climbed up to straddle her, turning her chin back towards me.

“Be a good girl and say it.”

She whimpered before she nodded, breathless. “I... want you to fuck me.”

There seriously wasn’t anything better in the world than Harper begging me to do whatever I wanted with her. I was getting soaked just seeing her like this. “Good girl,” I said. “Then go ahead and take the rest of this off, too. I want to see you on your knees.”

I’d barely even moved off of her before she was stripping her clothes off frantically, fumbling with the hooks on her bra before she dropped it on the floor, her pants and underwear next.

She was *so* ready for me. She’d shaved and everything. I bit my lip, stroking up close to the top of her thigh, tracing the

creases in her skin there. “You’ve been waiting for this, haven’t you, Harper?”

She bit her lip. “Paisley... please...”

I bent down and pressed a kiss against the top of one breast. “If you’re going to beg, you might as well get on your knees.”

She gasped out a breathless noise, but she obeyed—slipped down off the couch and onto her knees, looking up at me, pleading. “Please,” she whispered, and didn’t she just look so perfect like that? Those innocent, sweet little eyes stained with lust, looking up at me like she’d die if I didn’t take her, use her, ruin her pretty little body? I caressed a hand down the side of her face, cradling her by the chin, and I whispered in the softest tone I could.

“Good girl.”

It always lit her up when I said that. I loved it. I caressed my fingers through her hair, stroking her with my thumb as I looked her over, taking her in.

“You got what I told you to, right?”

She let out a breathless murmur, nodding. “It’s... it’s in the bedroom. Bedside table, on the left.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” I laughed, standing up. “Stay there for me.”

It had been a random impulse telling her to buy a toy, but it was a lot more fun than just buying it myself. And I’d been thinking about it ever since.

I found it in her bedroom right where she’d told me, the O-ring harness and a long, jet-black strap-on dildo, and I fitted it on easily. I still kept my clothes on over it, pants open for the strap, just... the idea of having Harper on her knees naked for me while I was still dressed was fun somehow. And she seemed to like it, too, once I came back out of the bedroom, her eyes fixing squarely on the strap, her face red.

“Someone’s excited,” I laughed, standing over her and having a really, really special time seeing how it looked with

my cock in her face. “You could try looking at me, instead of just my cock...”

“I—” She blushed harder still, looking up at me. “S-sorry—I—”

I laughed, brushing my thumb over her cheekbone. “I’m teasing you. You picked out a good one. Fits nicely. You were a *very* good girl picking this out.”

She swallowed hard. “Paisley...”

“I gave you a compliment.” I put a finger to her lips. “It’s *thank you, ma’am*.”

“Th-thank you... ma’am.”

“That’s better.” I slipped my hand down her face, cradling her chin. “Now, what shall I do to reward you...?”

Her eyes slid back down to my cock. I let out a murky laugh.

“You’re desperate, aren’t you?”

She didn’t even hesitate, totally under my control at this point. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good girl.” I sank onto the couch in front of her, my legs on either side of her, and I took her by the back of the head and guided her to take it in her mouth, sliding her down over the shaft, slowly, easing her down onto it a bit at a time. The obscene noises her mouth made on it, the way her whole body arched into it like there was nothing else she existed for except to choke on my cock—*god*, though, I really needed to fuck her.

She came up a second later gasping for air, her face redder, breathing hard, and I bit my lip, gripping her hair tightly in my fist.

“You like sucking my cock, don’t you?”

She nodded, breathlessly.

“Good girl. You look so pretty on your knees taking it down your throat like that.” I took her by the back of the head

again, guiding her down over my cock, watching it disappear into her mouth, watching her bob slowly up and down on me.

God, I was getting wet.

It wasn't long before I couldn't hold back any longer, and I pulled her up off of me and tilted her head back, bending down to press my lips against hers in a fierce, heated kiss. She moaned against my lips, and I felt her movements as she touched herself absently, her shoulder shifting with the movement. Good. I wanted her as ready as possible.

I pulled away and swept an arm over the table behind her, clearing the junk on it over to the side, and I tugged Harper up to her feet before I pushed her back onto the table—she went all too eagerly, letting out a gasp that turned into a moan as she sank back on the table, wrapping her legs around me, her face glazed with lust, with need.

She was so pretty like this. Shame I hadn't thought to record this time. We'd have to do it again.

“Going to be a good girl now and take my cock?” I whispered, and she bit her lip hard, nodding. I guided the tip of the strap-on to her entrance, teasing along her folds, and she groaned, rocking her hips, searching for more. “Tell me what you want,” I said.

“Please—please fuck me.”

“Good girl.” I gripped her by the shoulder, holding her in place while I pushed my cock inside her—moving slowly, even though I just wanted to fuck her ferociously, without inhibitions—pushing in as she arched her back and pressed her head against the table surface, until she'd taken the full length of it, and I held there, deep inside her, against her.

I pulled out slowly, feeling how easily it moved against her slick walls, until it was just the tip inside her, and moving in one swift motion, I thrust back deep inside her, and she cried out, gripping me tighter with her legs, a haze settling over her features.

God, I wanted to fucking break her.

I found my hips moving by themselves, pulling back and thrusting back into her, fucking her relentlessly, and she gasped, cried out, strained against me, rocking her hips and grinding on my cock. She started out gasping words, pleading, desperate, trying to say something, but it turned into wild noises of animalistic lust as I broke her down, fucking her senseless. She slipped a hand down between her legs, running tight circles over her clit, moving faster and arching her back more into me the higher she went, the more her orgasm built, and just as she was about to climax—she struggled trying to say it, but her voice slurred and she couldn't get through two words in a row, but I saw it in her eyes, in the way she strained every muscle—I bent over her and clasped a hand on her mouth, muffling her. She collapsed into an explosive orgasm, a muffled scream against my hand as she clenched tight around me, thrusting her hips into me, taking my cock as deep as it could go and hanging there in an orgasm so powerful she seemed totally whited out, before she slumped against the table, breathing hard, gasping for breath once I pulled my hand away from her mouth.

Slowly, I pulled myself out of her, and I bent down to kiss her, a slow and languid thing before she broke off laughing breathlessly.

“God,” she whispered. “Oh... wow.”

“Yeah? Happy with your purchase?”

She laughed, turning her head away, red-faced and breathless. I let her have it this time. “You... holy hell, Paisley.”

“I'm glad you like it.” I sat on the table next to her, running my fingers idly over her naked body. I couldn't get enough of touching every inch of her. “Have to make sure I can satisfy my wife, you know.”

“Mm. You do a really good job...”

I caressed my fingers down her thighs, feeling her twitch at the sensitivity right now. “Just let me know when you're ready for my turn, because I need to come all over you after all of that.”

“God, yes. Please. Just one second.”

She was a great wife. I could not get enough.

Chapter 19

Harper

Hampton Plaza was dressed up nicely for the festival. The festival committee—fronted by Emberlynn this year, because of course Emberlynn wasn't passing up an opportunity to organize a social event—had paid nicely for me to stock the place with baked goods, and they hadn't pulled any punches with the décor, either. The white lattice was all dressed up with ribbons and netting, flower arrangements along the square and in the field, and I'd arrived to unload the baked goods early, while they were still setting up the decorations.

Emberlynn almost bumped into me, carrying an armload of paper tableware, and she beamed at me through sleep-deprived, dark-ringed eyes.

“Hey,” she said. “Thanks for getting everything in on time.”

“You get *any* sleep last night?”

“A little,” she laughed, leaning against the buffet table, setting down the stuff she was carrying. She covered up a yawn. “I told myself I'd go to bed no later than ten so I could get up bright and early for this. Good news, I think I got the perfect guitar for the intro. Drum entrance is really on-point too.”

“Bad news is you were up until two doing that.”

She put her hands on her hips. “It was only one-thirty, thank you very much.”

I laughed. “Take it easy today, all right? You're not the only member of the planning committee.”

“Yeah, I'm lucky Annabel was able to sign up this year...” She waved a hand across the plaza, towards where Annabel and Aria were hanging up a curtain along the edge of

the plaza. “She was touch and go until the last minute, but she managed to make it.”

“Think it’s just because she wants to hit on Aria?”

“Probably. But I’ll take what I can get,” Emberlynn said, rubbing her eyes before she caught herself. “Shoot. My eyeliner. Did I smudge it?”

“You’re good,” I laughed. “You actually participating in the festival, or are you going to sleep through it?”

“Um... still up in the air. And you?” She gave me an odd, sidelong smile. “First time in a while you’ll get to attend with someone.”

“I—Emberlynn, I’m not dating anybody.”

“You think I can’t see through Paisley’s whole thing?” she said through another yawn. “Not like she’s being subtle. *Stealing my girl.*”

“That’s...” I felt my face burn. I hated that it did that. “You know her damn well enough to know she just says things.”

She smiled sadly at me. “You know, if you’re leaving, what does it matter? Might as well enjoy it—that time you have here with her.”

“I...” I looked away with a frustrated sigh. “I’ve got stuff to do.”

“Mm-hm.”

I spoke in a smaller voice, quieter, just a breath. “Look... I don’t want to hurt her. Or myself. There’s no sense just... chasing something that’s about to vanish and breaking our hearts.”

“Trust me,” she said, putting a hand on my arm, “it doesn’t work like that. You have those feelings whether you act on them or not. It’s still going to be heartbreak. You’re just going to regret not doing anything with those feelings.”

I sighed, long and distant, staring out to the field, where Gwen and Kay had shown up now, setting up the sound

system. They were an obnoxiously cute couple, Gwen wearing a pantsuit and Kay in a pink minidress, and Kay was practically attached to Gwen's arm, giggling about something.

It was a universe I never knew, was never allowed to know. Something so far away from me, I could never reach it. I'd tried once, tried with Annabel, and... even though I said it was about her being attracted to other women, I had to admit it had just been an excuse for the real reason.

I could hardly be like that. Just... prance around dating, frivolous, having fun, being together with somebody, when I was... well, when I was Harper. When she'd died for this.

Emberlynn sighed. "You know... I'm going to miss you."

"Mm. You've always been good to me." I focused on moving things around on the table, adjusting the presentation just so. Just keeping my hands busy. "Giving me a never-ending list of social events to keep me busy."

"Make sure you visit sometimes, okay? Not that long a flight from NYC to here."

"I know. I'll, uh..." I sighed. Emberlynn followed my gaze out to the field, Ms. Connelly adjusting her flower arrangements, Charlie there with her. Girl had taken to Ms. Connelly like the grandmother she never had.

They'd be just fine without me.

"I'll make sure I swing by," I lied, my heart not really in it. "Wouldn't want to miss out on seeing what questionable work situation you've gotten yourself into this time, how much Priscilla has gotten on her plate..."

"It's a family. Bit of a messy one sometimes, but it's mine." She smiled sweetly at me. "And it's yours. No matter how far you are. All right," she said with a yawn, stretching her arms over her head, "I should finish setting the tables... just a bit left to do now and then I'll see if I can stay awake."

Bayview was never a town where people took anything too seriously, so nobody actually showed up at the official start time—half the people showed up early and the other half

would stroll in at some point. Either way, for once, Paisley was in the early crowd, turned out, because I was in the middle of a conversation with Aria wondering if I was supposed to tell her now that I was leaving and suddenly blanking on how—I jumped when someone tapped me on the shoulder, and I turned back and felt my heart in my mouth at the sight of Paisley, wearing a pale gold dress and sandal heels, a light and fresh makeup look, and her hair braided. I’d never even seen her with her hair braided. Hardly an everyday look for her, but it was cute. Good for an event.

“Don’t just gawk,” Paisley said, putting a hand on her hip. “I’m expecting a compliment.”

Behind me, Aria laughed. “Someone’s dressed up today.”

Paisley sniffed dismissively at the air, not looking away from me. “Hm... I’m choosing not to acknowledge that she’s here.”

“That’s a new dress,” I said, something fluttery in my heart. She’d been going out more and more wearing these kinds of looks, a little at a time, but this was her first time attending an actual major event like this, one where half of Bayview would see her. “It’s gorgeous. Did you pick it out with Kay?”

“Nope.” She puffed her chest out. “Grabbed it myself. Specifically for the festival. It’s got total spring vibes, am I right or am I right?”

“Definitely right,” I said. “Honestly? I didn’t know you even could braid your hair that well.”

She beamed. “Can’t. Tried it and it looked like I had a bird’s nest on my head. I asked Priscilla to help.”

“It’s a cute look,” Aria said. Paisley shrugged.

“Still don’t hear anything from that direction.”

Aria put her hands up. “Far be it from me to commit the grievous sin of complimenting you, Paisley, dear. Have fun, you two.”

My first instinct was to reach out and catch her before she could walk away, grab her by the hand and tell her *we're not dating or anything like that*, but... well, that would just make things more suspicious.

Besides, we were.

I nodded Paisley towards the front of the plaza, where people were lining up and gathered around the buffet tables, sitting at the tables in their pink-and-white checkered tablecloths, faint music streaming from the speakers around the square. “Hey,” I said. “You remember that peach-mint jam you were obsessed with?”

She lit up. “Oh my god. Did you bring it here?”

“I can do you one better. Made danishes and cream puffs with it. Just for you.”

Paisley beamed so bright it was like there was nothing else in the universe. “*Harper*. Oh my god. I’m a lucky woman. I’m stealing, like, five. And you. C’mon.”

She took my hand, and my heart jumped into my mouth when she leaned in and gave me a swift peck on the cheek, leading me towards the food.

Why couldn’t I pull away? Why couldn’t I tell her we needed to stop this?

Not that it mattered. Forty people had just seen her kiss me. This was Bayview, so by the end of the night, everyone would know.

So most of all, why wasn’t I upset?

I wanted this so badly. *So* badly, it tore something out of me, and it left me hollow, aching, bleeding, even as I stood by the food line next to Paisley and listened to her gush about the pastries, even as I laughed together with our friends who were all, ever so politely, not saying anything about the two of us.

Nobody until, of course, Priscilla showed up.

It was an hour into the festival when she showed up—her special training session was scheduled right at the start of the festival, and unsurprisingly a well-regarded Olympic coach

couldn't spare a lot of flexibility on time—and I'd gotten a second to myself, sitting at the edge of the square watching as Paisley and Emberlynn chatted about something together, leaning over the railing between the plaza and the field. I'd been so focused on the two of them—something there that I wasn't sure how to describe—that I didn't even notice Priscilla coming until the chair pulled out next to me, scraping over the stone.

“Hey there,” she said, smiling softly at me as she sank into the seat.

“Hey. You're... dressed better than I expected. Thought you'd throw a shirt and pants on over your swimsuit, towel your hair out halfway...”

She laughed lightly, looking down at the form-fitting silver dress she was in. “Oh... you know. I'd die if I went out without dressing up. Plus, Annabel likes this dress, and I'm a sucker for her, so... you know.”

I longed for a world where she hadn't said that. I had enough first-hand experience to know Annabel loved a dress like that specifically because it could slide right off. It was a relief to realize I didn't feel jealous, just... like I didn't want to know about my friends' sex lives.

Maybe it was a relief I was leaving. If I stayed here, stayed with Paisley, people would definitely find out about my sex life. It was a miracle she hadn't already let slip about anything we'd done, but I especially didn't need anybody to know about me and her strap last night...

“It's good to see you again,” I said, pulling my mind up out of the gutter. “Tell me you're getting a break soon.”

She hung her head. “Thank god, yes. Spring break is the week after next.”

“Oh yeah? Fun plans?”

“Annabel hasn't mentioned?” She tucked her hair back behind her ear, blushing a little as she glanced across the square to where Annabel was half-arguing, half-laughing over something together with Gwen and Kay. “We're, um... kind of

taking a vacation together. Not far, just a little getaway for the two of us.”

“Little lovebirds.”

“Look who’s talking,” she said, nodding towards Paisley. I looked away.

“C’mon.”

“You’re freer these days. So is she. It’s good to see she’s embracing putting herself out there more.”

“With some help on the braids.”

She laughed. “Um... her initial effort wasn’t, you know... it wasn’t *that* bad.”

“Coming from you, that’s devastating.”

“So?” She leaned towards me, folding her arms on the table. “You and Paisley—”

“It’s nothing.”

“You came here together, didn’t you?”

“Er...” I scratched my head. “I mean, not strictly.”

She sighed, watching me for a while, and I felt like ripping my own skin off under her gaze. Maybe I needed to dive under a table or something. It was probably only a matter of time before she read my mind and said something I didn’t need to hear.

It was only a matter of time, turned out. She scratched idly at her wrist and said, “So... what is it?”

“I came here by myself, just setting up—”

“Not that. Just... where are you?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Not that far. I believe if you look really hard, you’ll find me.”

She smiled thinly. “I’ve been trying, and I haven’t found anything. I’ve wondered... for a while. Why is it like you aren’t there?”

I turned away. “Ah. Back to this.”

“You never told me *why* you’re so afraid of admitting to your feelings for Paisley. You’re leaving and you won’t tell anyone, too.”

“I’m going to—”

“But that’s not really what gets me the most,” she said, speaking carefully. “What gets me the most is that... you aren’t... sad over leaving.”

I tensed up. “I mean—”

“But you aren’t happy, either.”

I hung my head. “So. You want to tell me what it is that I’m feeling? Let’s skip the preamble and just get to it.”

She studied me for a while before she spoke, again, carefully, measuring out each word. “Okay. I mean, I can take a guess. But I told you I’m not a mind reader. It’s just what I’m feeling.”

“Hit me.”

“You’re doing it for someone else. Doing everything for someone else. And it’s... it’s not Paisley. Even though you love her.”

“I—” I scratched my head, sighing, looking away, mostly to hide the burning sensation in my chest. “Now we’ve decided I’m in love with her, huh?”

“Is that what it is?”

I needed to stop spending time with this woman. “Not quite.”

“Mm... you won’t look right at me, though. So I don’t think that’s far off.”

“Priscilla—do you do this with everyone you know?”

She laughed. “No. I know it annoys most people. You’re more patient than most.”

I closed my eyes, sinking against the table. “Did you try the rhubarb pie? I know you were looking forward to strawberry-rhubarb season.”

She quirked a smile at me. “You have everybody’s pastry tastes filed away like birthdays and anniversaries, don’t you?”

“Mm-hm. So please do update me if your tastes change, I need to adjust the Rolodex.”

She blinked. “The what?”

“I forget how young you are sometimes...”

“I did not try any of the food yet,” she said, sitting up straighter. “But I will. Now... did we dodge the topic for long enough?”

“Eh... I could still go for longer.”

Her face fell, expression turning more serious. “You’re leaving before too much longer. Are you going to just disappear without anybody ever really knowing you?”

I winced. “You’re cutting today, aren’t you?”

She looked down. “Sorry. That came out harsh. I didn’t mean it like that. Just... I just think... it’s just that you deserve better. I know that.”

I kicked at the dirt. “So, who do you think this person I’m living for is? Since you’ve got me all figured out.”

“I don’t know...” She chewed her cheek. “All I know is that when we talk about them, it’s just... you miss them terribly. *So much.*”

I really needed to stop hanging out with her. I massaged my temple. “Well, I’m sure they were lovely, whoever they were.”

She paused. “*Were* implies they’re gone.”

“Ugh, god.”

“So there is someone. Was someone.”

My head felt icy all of a sudden. “Priscilla, I don’t want to talk about this,” I said, my voice bitterly cold, and Priscilla flinched.

“I... all right.” She softened. “I’m sorry. I won’t bring it up anymore.”

Dammit. *This* was why I needed to leave. I was surrounded by people who saw right through me, who had spent the past years picking at me until they could see through the cracks and see what was underneath, and I didn't... I didn't want them to see her.

Lindsay was gone. And if I was keeping it that way, I'd have to keep moving.

A cold resolution settled in my stomach. *I have to keep moving* echoed in my mind, a chilling refrain that left a bitter, metallic taste in my mouth.

Leaving Bayview probably wasn't going to be the end. I'd get comfy in New York, and I'd probably meet people there—make friends, get close to people. Maybe even develop feelings for someone. And one day, one of them would start peeking through the cracks too, and then I'd have to go. On to the next place. It could only ever make me better, make me stronger.

Susanna Holcomb was a savior, in a way. Inviting me out of this town. I couldn't afford to stay here a moment longer. I was getting out, and not a moment too soon, and I'd learned my lesson.

And I had to learn how to do it without hesitation. Without dragging myself down in it just because I had friends, just because I was in love with someone.

It was the least I could do. If I couldn't say I was sorry, this was all there was to do.

I stood up, pushing my chair back, a feeling in my stomach like a cable wound tight.

"I'm going to see Emberlynn," I said. "Maybe... make some kind of announcement. Let everyone know I'm going. Guess it's now or never."

Priscilla moved quickly, standing with me, and she caught me with a hand on my arm. "Harper—"

I pulled away. "It's okay."

She caught me again, her hand back on my arm. “Good luck,” she said, her voice soft. “It’s probably going to bring up a lot of feelings. Hard ones. Just... give yourself space to feel them, okay?”

I sucked in a sharp breath, suddenly dizzy. Priscilla was a good friend. A better friend than I deserved.

“Yeah.” I let out my breath slowly, and somehow or other, I let myself give Priscilla a tight hug—it had just happened naturally, and I squeezed her, but it felt right. “Thanks, Priscilla. You’ve been there for me through a lot. It means a lot.”

“Likewise. I’m glad I’ve gotten to know you.”

Turned out knowing someone wasn’t always easy. Turned out sometimes saying hello meant saying goodbye.

Chapter 20

Paisley

Ugh, I was bummed.

Anything that made me sad—of all people, *me*—should have been illegal. But... in this case, the person making me sad was also the person who made me really happy.

Feelings, huh? Things sucked.

Emberlynn could still see right through me, because she slid onto the bench next to me while I was looking like a lost puppy out at where Harper was talking to Gwen by the sound set. I barely even registered Emberlynn there next to me until she nudged me.

“Going to stop checking out your girlfriend for two seconds and join the rest of us on earth?”

I glowered at her. “Okay, first of all, how dare *you* try pulling that when you’ve spent half your time since getting with my sister staring at her butt—”

She put her hands up. “Hey. At least I still talk to people.”

“It’s worse when it’s your sister!”

She scratched her arm. “Yeah... thinking of my family, I’m glad you’re not hitting on my sister.”

“Pretty sure it makes you glaze over when you think about your family.”

She shrugged, looking down. “Mom’s been talking to me more lately. Think she’s just preparing to be bored with my sister moving out for college in the fall... empty-nester at last.”

“Telling you to go visit her for Thanksgiving? I’ll give you a boiled eggplant to bring.”

She rolled her eyes, smiling drily. “Apparently, she wants to visit me. So... might have a mom or even a dad swinging by.”

“Oh, shit, seriously?” I turned to face her. “They’re leaving their cornfield?”

“Probably just Mom. Dad’s busy. And probably going to enjoy having the house to himself while she’s gone. But yeah... she’s venturing out of her cornfield. Wants to meet Aria.”

“Oh, that’ll be rich,” I said flatly. “Do they know yet that she’s up to her eyes in money?”

She laughed nervously. “Nope... haven’t gotten around to mentioning that yet.”

“They’re going to get on your case about when you’re marrying her.”

She scratched her head. “That’s exactly what I’m afraid of. They’re not super hard off, but they’re not rolling in it either. If they try to mooch off Aria, I want to tell them off, but I don’t know if I have the guts.”

“Then I will,” I said, sitting up straighter. “Just bring me around. It’s my solemn duty as your best friend to tear them a new one on your behalf.”

She grinned. “Thanks, Pais. Not sure if you can handle it, though.”

I snorted. “Please. There’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“She loves spicy food. We’ll have dinner that would cook you to death.”

I faltered. That was hardly fair. “I’ll... I’ll eat the mashed potatoes and the bread.”

She relaxed back in her seat. “Genuinely, it’ll be a lot easier to breathe if I have you there. I’ll let her know my next-door neighbor will help herself in through the window to join us.”

I huffed. “I can use the door for polite company.”

“Yeah, just a question of which door,” she said. “If you climb over the balcony and in that way...”

“Fussy. I’m a woman of convenience. I take the shortest path.”

She dropped her gaze to the ground, slouching forwards. “Hey, um... thanks.”

“For climbing over your balcony? Girl, you don’t even have to say a word. I’m already on it.”

“This is gonna blow your mind. No, that’s not it.” She shook her head. “For being there.”

I paused. “Well... yeah. We’re besties.”

“Yeah. Just... I don’t know if it’s just me, but it’s felt a little off lately. But I think it’s me inventing a problem.”

I felt like something untied in my chest, unraveled, came loose enough that I could breathe again, and I relaxed. “Um... you know, I’d actually been whining to Kay about that not long ago. Like I feel awkward and... um...”

She glanced at me, waiting for me to finish the sentence. As if I knew how to finish a sentence.

“I dunno. Like things are fixed in place. Like I’m supposed to be a certain way. And then it’s like it’s not me anymore, and then I’m just... just kinda lost.”

She smiled softly, glancing down at my dress. “Clearly been having some luck pushing out of your comfort zone with Harps, though.”

“Yeah. ‘Cause she’s leaving.” I shifted. “Um... guess I figured I could embarrass myself in front of her all I liked, and it wouldn’t matter.”

“Not gonna lie, I had to do a double take when I saw you here because I genuinely did not think it was you. But... hey. You look good like this.” She paused. “And that’s a very elaborate excuse to dress up for your girlfriend.”

I hung my head. “She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Uh-huh.”

“She’s my wife, don’t you know?” I pulled my keys from my bag, jingling them. “She gave me the keys to her house and bakery. Now we’re basically married.”

She softened. “I’m really sorry.”

I dropped my arms by my sides. “Damn. Are you really dragging my wife like that?”

“Not that. Just...” She looked down, toeing the lines between stones on the floor. “She’s leaving. It’s going to hit all of us hard, but nobody harder than you.”

I tried desperately to shove down the burning feeling in my chest, and I looked away. “Yeah, big talk from the one who was spitting fireballs at the idea of me with her to begin with —”

“I was *spitting fireballs* at you casually dropping details of the weird exhibitionist sex you had—”

“Ugh, it was an accident! It’s not like we do *that* much weird stuff.”

“Recording yourself railing her on top of the lighthouse? That’s tame, then, huh?”

“Look, that’s one of the weirder ones. The last two times have both been at her house—”

“Paisley. Oh my god.” She put her hands over her face. “I don’t want to hear about any of the times.”

“At this point, you’re asking for it. The next time you bring it up, I’m going into blow-by-blow detail—”

“Spare me. I don’t need to picture Harper in a harness or whatever you’re doing next.”

“*Her?* You think *she’s* the one with the harness?”

She gave me a look like she wanted to die right now. I cleared my throat.

“I mean... hypothetically.”

“Oh my god.” She hung her head. “What I’ve been *trying* to say is that... I think you two make a good couple.”

My mouth felt so dry suddenly it was like I'd bitten down on a roll of cotton. I swallowed trying to get rid of it. "Yeah?"

"Mm-hm. I mean, look at you. Exploring your style and self-expression, getting out there and trying all kinds of things... diving into how you really feel. I mean, that's what being human is, right? What it means to be a part of something—really, truly a part of something. You're not putting on a performance, not trying to get people to think of you a certain way or see you a certain way, not trying to be something, just... letting yourself be. And be perceived. Everything that makes you *you*—even the embarrassing ones, you own them, carry them. And the right people are the ones who help you do that. Who like everything about you. Harper..." She cast her gaze back out towards Harper, but it felt like she was looking through her—seeing much further beyond her. "When I see you with Harper, I think you're like that. Really, honestly you. And I... I want that for you."

I slumped back against the bench, rolling the point of one heel along the ground. "Emby waxing poetic."

"It's Emberlynn."

"Ever considered writing song lyrics?"

"Yeah. They sucked. I leave it to the lyricists. You're just saying bullshit to get out of addressing difficult things."

I huffed. "It's extremely rude of you to call me out when I didn't ask you to. Ugh..."

"It's okay to tell me how you feel. Even the embarrassing feelings."

I shrank into myself, feeling like a withering leaf—crumpling up on myself, getting smaller, fading. "How I feel is dumb. Really dumb. Like... how do you even know when you're in love with someone?"

She shrugged. "You just... you just feel it. Your heart says it, not your head."

"My heart says I love cheese."

“You’re just saying bullshit to get out of—”

“Shut up! Shut up.” I shook my head. “Just wish... my heart would put things in plain English for me to understand.”

She paused. “You don’t... know how you feel about her?”

“Is this what love is?” I shrugged, hugging myself tighter, feeling naked. Wearing fancy clothes and nice makeup, trying to be pretty, that was easy compared to baring all of this. “Just thought... thought it was some kind of wild, all-in, smack-you-upside-the-face feeling.”

“Oh, no,” she laughed. “No. Almost never. It’s the kind of feeling, the kind of realization, that comes in so slowly it’s never easy to pin down when it started. It’s like the sunrise. Hard to pick the exact moment that the sun started to rise, but then you look around and it’s impossible to deny that the sun is there, lighting up the world.”

I snorted. “Aria’s made you so corny. Ugh.”

“Okay, dumbass. More like when you’ve been lying in bed and you don’t know when you zoned out and lost track of time, but sure enough you look around and you’ve been here for three hours playing sudoku so you *definitely* zoned out somewhere. It’s like that.”

“Okay, that one I can relate with.” Still, my gaze drifted across the field to where Harper and Gwen were doing something at Gwen’s computer together, and even though it was much too corny to ever admit aloud, looking at Harper made me relate more to the first one, because *damn*, she really did have a way of lighting up the world.

It wasn’t very fair.

I shifted in my seat. “She’s getting ready to announce her departure, huh?”

“Mm. She told me just before I came over here to harass you,” she said. “Said she needed to tell everybody as swiftly as possible, hopefully one-and-done, all in one go. Told her to ask Gwen, said she might as well just broadcast it over the sound system, give a little speech. And, uh...” She avoided my

gaze. “Thought I’d sit with you. Guess I might have bothered for some reason to worry about you, worry you might be sad, and thought I’d keep you company. I’ll buzz off if you want to be alone, though.”

I was kind of glad I wasn’t the only one who was awkward sometimes. I hunched forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “You’re not getting away from me that easily. Once Harper’s gone, I have no one to attach to but you, so... anyway, just quit trying to run away.”

“Yeah, yeah. Guess I can do that.”

Harper had always been so... quietly good. Never getting directly involved in a lot, but always making things better for everyone around her. Made sense she’d help me fix my awkwardness with Emberlynn and help me get over my embarrassment around my image before she left.

That stupid-ass jerk. She never did let other people do nice things for her.

Of all the dumbass people for me to fall for. Me! One would be forgiven for thinking Paisley Macleod, the de facto empress of Bayview, would have better taste.

But things never turned out how you planned them, did they?

Six months later

Chapter 21

Harper

I took the stairs up two at a time, pushing out into floor 31 and making a sharp right. This company had liquid cash flow out the nose, but they still never found a budget for a designer, from the looks of things—the tacky carpet running the floor of the office hall looked like it might have been there since the 90s, a kind of faded baby-blue that didn't do any favors with the eggshell walls.

I knocked at Susanna's door, and her voice called out lightly from inside.

"Harper? Come in."

I pushed the door open as she rose from her desk inside, reaching over and taking the folder I handed her. "Here's everything. Sorry it took a minute."

"Please." She waved me off, flicking through the folder. She was a woman in her late forties, dark hair in tight curls, a loose shirt with a paisley pattern in a vibrant red that brought out the warm tones in her medium skin tone. She had a thing for paisley patterns. I'd always managed not to think about it too much. "When I say end of day, I just mean I want it there when I get to the office next. You're always punctual."

I hadn't stopped moving for one second since I got to New York. Just... felt right this way. Felt right for being me, being Harper. "So, looks good?"

"Looks good to me, but I'm not the one evaluating it." She snapped the folder shut, and she closed her laptop. "Free tonight?"

I paused. "Er... why?"

She smiled. "I'm attending an event we're catering for. Mayor's there, schmoozing with some deep-pocket corporate types. Ostensibly it's a *political action summit*, something or other about addressing crime in the city, but... well, you know

how these things are. You've been so busy in the office and the bakeries that you haven't touched ground in a lot of the actual events we do, and it might get you some good perspective to see some of our higher-profile events in action."

I didn't even hesitate. I'd had plans for the evening, but only in the way I did every evening—plans for the sake of having plans. Keeping myself moving. Any one plan was interchangeable with any other. "Sure, I'm game. Dress code?"

"The suit will fit in perfectly. Unless you'd rather get changed."

"No, this is good. Are we heading straight there, then?"

She waved the folder in the air as she headed for the door, flicking off the lights on her way out. "Handing this over to Solomon and we're on our way. Make no mistake—the mayor is obviously the most high-profile figure there, but talking to him won't be interesting."

I fell in line beside her as we walked through the halls, moving quickly. New Yorkers were all like that. No wonder Aria had a stride that always left us in the dust. "He's that dull?"

"Too popular. Rule of thumb, Harper," she said, gesturing with the folder at me. "In an event, you don't look for the person with the highest standing. You look for the person with the highest ratio of standing to attention. Find the guy who's important but everybody's overlooking him, and make him feel important. Then the world is yours."

"And... any idea who that is?"

"Jessica Perler, an operations executive for a construction conglomerate for the tri-state area. Internal hire, pretty recent, so she's not exactly coming in with a strong personal network here. She'll probably be grateful to be flattered. Solomon," she called, pausing at Solomon Forrester's office, leaning inside and waving the folder.

"Designs statement?" he said, standing up and stepping around the two he shared his office with, leaning in the doorframe as he took the folder. "Brilliant. Harper's work?"

I nodded. “Compiling and reviewing, anyway.”

He smiled lightly at me. “And now I see Holcomb’s whisking you away. Rubbing elbows with the mayor?”

“Susanna tells me I should be rubbing elbows with someone less popular... preying on rich people’s insecurities, I think is what she’s saying.”

“You don’t need to put it like that,” Susanna laughed. Solomon set the folder down with a deep, rich laugh. He was a big guy, six two with dark skin and a killer fashion sense, and he’d always been clear about his interest in me... respectfully so, and he was an attractive man, but I just felt nothing.

I think I’d felt nothing from anyone this whole time. There was just work—blessed work.

“Well,” Solomon said, “I’m sure you could get anyone at that party to like you, Harper.”

“Just such a natural at charming people, I know,” I said.

“Hey. Pick out a person in this office who doesn’t like you. Or the central bakery, for that matter. I defy you.”

“Veronica?”

He waved me off. “Veronica’s never liked anyone a day in her life. She doesn’t count. All right, Harper, skedaddle. Any chance I can catch you this weekend in the Upper East Side?”

“I’ll be there.” Not because I was so eager to see people, but... just... just to fill the schedule. To keep me moving.

Susanna led me a ways down the hall before she said, “Normally people wait until the boss isn’t looking to flirt with their coworkers.”

“Solomon doesn’t care what people normally do, I don’t think. Marches to the beat of his own drum.”

She quirked a smile at me. “Very skillful tacit rejection, Harper.”

I shrugged, just keeping my eyes ahead. “He’s nice. But I’ve only just started here... I’m just focusing on the job.”

“It’s been almost half a year.”

I didn’t say anything, just turning it over in my head. *Half a year.* The words sounded so surreal. It felt like half a year passed in my first week here—waking up alone in a tiny apartment, nobody there climbing in through my window or moving around in my kitchen. Who would have thought I’d miss getting my house broken into?

Those last two weeks in Bayview, after I’d copied my keys for Paisley, she’d barely been in her own house. She fell asleep in my bed almost every night, and for the first week, I moved about quietly in the mornings, getting ready for my early start in the bakery. By the second week, I’d realized I could start a rock band and not wake up Paisley, but there had still been a kind of sacred silence waking up next to her and taking a moment to just... look at her, eyes shut, breathing slowly, before I got up.

And inevitably, I’d be halfway through my shift before Paisley would come down from upstairs, close the bakery for me to have a lunch break, and drag me back upstairs or out somewhere to have lunch. Breakfast for her. Bit odd making it work between someone who woke up at four and someone who woke up at eleven, but I wouldn’t have changed a thing.

Lindsay would have loved it.

Mornings in New York were torturous, especially since I still woke up at four and work didn’t start until nine. I was almost tempted to move somewhere cheaper in Jersey City and just take an hour commute, but... a long commute would have given me time to think.

So instead, I’d just packed everything I could into my day-to-day. And so the first week had lasted half a year, and the next half a year had lasted about a week. Funny how things worked.

“That blow your mind?” Susanna said, stepping into the elevator alongside me. “Time moves faster in the Big Apple.”

“No kidding.”

“That town you moved from, it was a small place, right? I think you said you ran that bakery yourself.”

“Yeah.” My voice came out colder than I meant, and I shifted my posture, watching the floor number go down. “So, tell me about the party.”

She raised her eyebrows, sensing the tension in my posture, the abruptness I steered away from the topic with, but she didn’t push it. Thank god. Bayview didn’t exist anymore. That was how it had to be.

The day melted into a slurry of moving around, walking with Susanna and arriving together at the event space that had a gorgeous 14th-story view of Manhattan and an eye for luxury in the décor, dressed up in Gilded Era stylings that were just on the right side of tasteful versus tacky, balanced out with warm neutrals and a few modern touches. Our display was exactly as I’d helped David Fontaine finish up the design for, an artful array of elegant dishes and pastries, classics accented with a few unusual standouts, taking heavy inspiration from the Gilded Era style to create something that looked luxurious, almost sinfully abundant without veering into overt maximalism.

Susanna was right—Jessica Perler wasn’t as connected as everyone else and was all too receptive to me and Susanna approaching her to talk about the party and how she was enjoying it, and I saw Susanna’s logic in bringing me along. Two against one meant Jessica was pulled into our dynamic instead of it being Susanna’s against hers, and bringing a new hire helped make it less intimidating at the same time, especially matching her presence as a new hire into the executive suite. She opened up before long, and it was a good conversation, getting to know her. Ended up linking us into a couple good chats with some other bigwigs in construction and infrastructure there, including a rail executive who was so friendly and charming you’d forget he was there basically to bribe the mayor into granting lucrative kickbacks.

Susanna left with the event finishing, but I stayed behind to help our crew clean up the catering, just for something to do, somewhere to be, someone to talk to. They weren’t bad in

terms of ops either—the staff got the juiciest scoops on what the executives were like when no one was looking, because the executives considered staff to be no one. Soured my feelings on Perler a little when poor Minh, whose English was good but not fluent, mentioned how snappy she'd gotten over her drink.

But it wasn't about liking people. It was about knowing them. Networking, I guess. Just for something to do—an objective to have. Liking people was inevitable, but I was in no rush to get there—it was just bound to lead to trouble.

I walked with Tasha to make sure she got to the subway safe, and it was only twenty minutes later, pushing in through the door of my apartment, that I was finally out of things to distract myself with. That it was quiet. Ten o'clock already so it was probably time for bed, but... the silence in my apartment was oppressive.

“Home sweet home,” I called out into the empty room, stripping off my suit jacket, hanging it up in the closet. My shoes came next, then the tie, and then once the shirt was gone, I took off the necklace—a simple pearl string necklace, no adornments except a silver tag on the clasp with a P and an H.

Was it a bit strange to wear a necklace underneath a shirt with a tie? Yeah, probably. But, well... that was what a parting gift did to you. *Wear it and remember me*, she'd said, through eyes shimmering with tears, and it was the one image I couldn't get out of my head—the last bit of Bayview I could never erase from my memory.

I didn't know Paisley anymore. But I still found myself putting the thing on every morning.

Once I was changed into something comfier, the necklace placed in its box on my nightstand, I heated up leftovers and sat by the tiny square window, looking out at the city as I poked my food.

A whole meticulously crafted ritual. But there were chinks in the armor, spots like this where the thoughts bled through, and the city was so... big, so dense, so full of life.

And it was so empty. And so quiet.

Nothing to it. I had the thoughts every time I stopped and looked around. Just another day in New York City. Work was good today. Work would be good tomorrow. I was on the way up.

I finished my food. Took a quick rinse, put on pajamas, kept my back to the mirror as I brushed my teeth, took a half a melatonin tablet, and I fell into bed, staring at the faint outlines of the building opposite mine through the curtain, squares of light from people staying up late. People living.

My phone buzzed. I picked it up as an automatic reflex—if someone wanted work done, I really wanted to be on it right now. My thoughts were wandering more than usual.

It was the exact opposite of what I needed right now, though. An app I hadn't used in years and that I'd forgotten I still had on my phone, with a message from a screen name it took me a second to place.

Annabel. Of all the people.

Hey, if you can see this. I know you've tried to erase us from your life, but I thought you deserved to know.

My stomach turned. I'd gotten a new number, new email, wiped everything I could from my life—just trying to start clean—but I'd forgotten about the messaging app Annabel and I had used back while we were dating. *You deserve to know...* it felt sickly familiar, the heavy wording.

I couldn't do this right now—couldn't do this ever. I was supposed to disappear. But another message came in while I was watching the notification bar.

Paisley's in the hospital. Hasn't been well. I know you're busy in New York, but I think it would do her good for you to see her again.

I strained to breathe, clutching the phone tighter. The room... I think it was spinning, seeming to lurch around me. I tasted something metallic on my tongue. Another buzz, another message.

I think it would do you good, too, but what do I know?

And as if that wasn't enough, another, one last twist of the knife.

Take care, Harps. We love you and we miss you, tons.

Chapter 22

Paisley

What a week. It shouldn't have been legal for bad things to happen to me, not when I was such a benevolent, perfect force of good in this world.

I slumped back on the hospital bed when the door opened and Emberlynn came in, carrying a wrapped-up parcel. "Hey," she said. "You've got a bit more color back."

"What'd you get me?"

"Not even a *hello*?"

"You'll get one if you got me something good."

She handed it over. "Chicken sandwich from Brandy's. With ranch dressing, extra pickles, and horseradish. Your favorite."

That *was* my favorite. Still, it felt as appetizing as stale bread right now. I took it trying not to look like I was taking a dead mouse a cat was offering me. "It's been a minute. Almost forgotten about these things."

"Uh-huh. Loaded up with enough horseradish to kill a horse, because, I insist to you again, it *is* spicy."

"Horseradish isn't *spicy*, it's just *warm*." I paused. "Did you sneak a burger all contraband-style past the doctor?"

She strained a smile at me. Poor Emby looked tired, too. She'd gone through the wringer, between all the work that had swamped her ever since she finished that big gig and having been the one to find me passed out on the floor. She'd stayed the whole night here with me last night, even though I told her I was *perfectly* capable of sleeping by myself. "She said you could use a burger or two."

"Damn, but that's advice I've been waiting to hear."

“Right. You can’t act like you’re an obsessed foodie without acknowledging the fact that you passed out from malnutrition.”

I slumped back against the headboard, rolling my head back against the wall. “Oh my god. I’m literally never living this down. I’m going to be a thousand years old hobbling along on my walking stick and you’ll be hobbling over to my house to knock on my door and remind me about the chicken burger incident. Might as well just strap me in fireworks and launch me into the sun.”

“I don’t think I’m living to be a thousand. Power to you if you want to set your sights high, though.”

I unwrapped the sandwich and took a bite, and it took about thirty seconds to actually swallow it. I felt full immediately, and I let my hands fall to my lap with the burger wrapper. “How have things been while I’ve been closed in here? Is Oliver still in one piece?”

She put a hand on my arm. “Please. Forget working for one second. Christ, I don’t know what to do with *you* as a workaholic.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I’m not a workaholic. I just wanna make sure my life doesn’t fall apart explosively around my ears and I end up disgraced, humiliated, lost to the eras in a—”

“Oliver’s just fine,” she said gently. “That bookstore was closed more often than not for the better part of its lifespan. Connor’s helping him out.”

“Ugh, that means they’re probably just making out in the store all the time.”

“Yeah, well, they’re both good-looking, so it’s just more sales from a bunch of girls hoping to catch the two of them going at it behind the register.”

“And Crystal Lights?”

She softened, smiling sweetly at me. Like she was patronizing me. Me! I fumed. “It can be closed for a bit.”

“Oh my god. The pull is going to be a nightmare when I get back there. The whole cycle is screwed. This is two days without croissants in production.”

“Paisley. Easy. You’re going to get yourself sicker. Eat.”

Dolefully, I took a second bite. It felt like climbing Everest. Nothing was ever supposed to be hard for me.

Emberlynn went on softly. “You know... this is what happens when you don’t look after yourself. If you burn yourself out keeping plates up, you’ll drop the plates, too.”

“Ugh, shove the plates up your butt.”

“I won’t, thanks.”

I muttered something to myself. She shook her head.

“Paisley... I’m going to say something you don’t like.”

“Thirty-three.”

“Ah-ah. Don’t bullshit your way out of this.” She folded her arms. “You can’t use work to fill the hole a person left.”

Oh, she wasn’t kidding with saying something I didn’t like. I felt something drop in my stomach, and I turned away, my head hurting. “Shut up. I know how to fill a hole.”

She cleared her throat. “Excuse me?”

I frowned. “I should have said that differently, but still. I’m good! I’ve been hollow all my life and it’s no different just because Harper went and ghosted the whole town of Bayview.”

Emberlynn put her hands up. “Okay, you have even deeper issues, then. You can’t fill those with work, either.”

“I’m not! I’m filling it with... with...” I gestured vaguely at the air. “With intention. With purpose. With action. With chicken burgers.”

“You categorically haven’t been filling up on enough chicken burgers. That’s why you’re here,” she said, gesturing to the hospital room, which looked like a plant nursery now between the pastel green walls, the window letting in rich, full

sunlight, and the bazillion flowers people had left me. Mrs. Park with the floristry shop was probably delighted I'd wound up here.

"Yeah, okay. I should have been eating more chicken burgers. That's criticism I'll happily take on board."

"Kathleen says she hasn't seen you in Hogshead in *weeks*. When was the last time you even stole my cheese?"

I scowled. "You're always bitching about it, and when I stop doing it, you tell me to steal more cheese?"

She softened. "Just... I've been worrying about you. A lot. And it's really hard because I *know* why you're in this state, and it reminds me way, *way* too much of when Aria left. I didn't let myself acknowledge how much of me... left with her. Didn't let myself grieve it properly. And I don't want you to do the same."

I forced myself to take another bite of food, just because I didn't want to respond. It tasted like I was chewing on cardboard. Did Brandy suddenly suck at making chicken burgers? Because I didn't remember them tasting like this.

"You loved her," Emberlynn said, and I shrugged.

"Eh."

"You called her your wife. I don't think that's something you do with a little crush."

I shrugged, a little less energy this time. "Eh."

She sighed, hanging her head. "You've always been so stubborn... it was almost better when it was about lizard breeding."

"You know how much longer they're gonna keep me in here? I need to figure out the situation at the bakery."

She put a hand up. "Fong's been checking in on the bakery at least to make sure nothing's going wrong. It's closed, but it's not, like... the food is all rotting or the ovens are running or anything."

“Fong’s just been going in there for better acoustics. Answer the question or I’ll ritually disembowel myself in front of you right now.”

“Easy there. Honestly?” She shrugged. “Despite the name, Doctor Hardy is kind of a softy. She’d let you off now if you asked. Just... please don’t rush out of here. You’re going to get seriously sick.”

“I’m *fine*.” I looked away. “Going to be seriously sick if I have to sit here brooding forever.”

“Please. Listen to what the doctor says. At *least* one more night here. Promise.”

“Fine. I promise. But I’m gonna be miserable.”

She looked down. An uneasy silence settled over the both of us. After a minute sitting in the tension, I cleared my throat.

“Just spit it out.”

“It’s just...” She shook her head. “Nah. Forget it. No point.”

“It’s morally indefensible to leave me hanging like that.”

She looked out the window. “I’m sorry. Sorry she left like that. I never would have imagined...”

I rolled my eyes, sagging in the bed. “Guess I should have let you leave me hanging.”

“Sorry.”

I shifted uncomfortably. “Um... thanks. You know. For checking in. Hanging around to make sure I’m okay. Bringing me a chicken sandwich.”

She perked up a little, giving me a sweet little smile. “Anytime, Pais. Said it yourself. Ride or die. I’m with you to the bitter end, no matter what.”

I laughed. “Hardly. I’m out here living to a thousand, and you’ve given up.”

“All right, all right. Well, if you’re living to a thousand, then so am I.”

“That’s better. You’re marrying into my clan, so you’re not allowed to dishonor it.”

She smiled wryly. “*Clan*, huh. Hell of a word. And I see you’ve moved on from telling me not to date your sister to just straight-up telling me to marry her...”

“Might as well just get it over with and be sisters already. You want to marry her, don’t you?”

A light flush tinged her cheeks, and she looked away. “I think it’s a little early to say... I think we like taking our time.”

“Focusing on your careers. Yeah, yeah. And you give me shit for working all the time.”

“Hey. At least Aria and I eat.”

“I’m eating!” I waved the sandwich at her before, my arm suddenly heavy, I let it drop by my side, sinking back against the headboard again. “I’m eating. Tastes like old socks, but I’m eating.”

She strained a smile, patting me on the arm. “It sucks. You remember I was like that after the label pulled the rug out from under me... you had to just about spoon-feed me soup.”

“Yeah, least I’m not that bad.”

“Um, you’re worse. You wouldn’t even take spoon-fed soup. So you passed out on the floor.”

I sighed. She squeezed my shoulder.

“Your appetite will come back. Just be gentle with yourself, okay? It’ll take time. Don’t force it, or you’ll just end up with eating disorders on top of no appetite.”

I squeezed the sandwich in my hands. “If I’m not forcing it, I don’t think I’ll finish this.”

She put her hand over it. “Then don’t finish it. Save it for later. No shame in that.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. I didn't *get* it. Harper was just a friend. I liked kissing her—liked doing more than kissing her—but we were never really anything but friends. Emberlynn was a friend, too, and she was here when I was hurt, looking after me, telling me all the things I needed to hear. Shouldn't that have been enough? Couldn't that have been enough?

“Thanks, Emby.”

“If you're going to thank me, say my damn name right.”

“Thanks, Emberlynn Morgan Isabella Wood.”

“You know, screw you too. I'll marry Aria and tack her names in there too. I'll be Emberlynn Morgan Isabella Ried Macleod Wood, and you'll refer to me by the whole thing or I won't acknowledge you.”

“What? Macleod has to go last, or you're disrespecting the clan.”

“Not even giving you that.” She clapped a hand on my shoulder before she stood up, pushing the chair back. “I promised Annabel I'd see her in a bit, so I'd better go, but... text me if you need anything. Anything at all. I'm here. Okay?”

“Mm. Thanks, Emby.”

“Dammit,” she laughed, shaking her head as she headed for the door. There was a warmth that she had around her, just like... the ease of familiarity. And it left with her when she shut the door behind her, and it was suddenly a hospital room again—cold and sterile and unfamiliar.

Time went past, somehow or other. I watched a TikTok or two, picked at my sandwich, talked to the doctor when she swung by, checked my email compulsively, made empty talk with the friends who came to visit, played with the flowers closest to me, and through all of it, I was suffocating on emptiness. Something was missing. Something had *always* been missing. And Emberlynn was wrong—I *could* fill that void by working. It didn't feel so rotten when I was busy.

Emberlynn sent me a text somewhere around nine, asking if I was still up, and when I sent her a selfie, she said

she'd keep me company again tonight. I told her off, saying she needed a proper bed and I wasn't going to be responsible for her falling apart too if she had to camp out next to me every night, and she told me she'd at least visit me again. It was barely five minutes later that a knock came from the door, and I set my phone down, looking up.

“Jesus, you're fast. Come in, Quicksilver.”

The door unlatched and swung open, and I shoved the last bite of sandwich into my mouth, just hiding the evidence that it had taken me five hours to eat the thing, and I'd only just managed to get it down and the wrapper in the trash before she came around the corner and into the room, except it wasn't Emberlynn.

And either I was high, or it was Harper.

I froze, my heart pounding wildly. There was no way. She'd cut off contact completely after leaving town—her number belonged to someone else now, and her work and personal email addresses both got an autoresponder saying the accounts were deactivated. Dropped off the face of the goddamn planet.

But I wasn't forgetting Harper.

She carried herself differently, had an aura around her that I didn't know how to describe, and she was wearing a black suit and a tie, looking so... different. And so much the same.

This girl could have traveled the world a hundred times over, changed her name a million times, gone to the ends of this earth and back, and I'd still know her eyes.

“Harper?” I said.

“Hey,” she said, and it was even her *voice*—I'd all but forgotten her voice. She was so guarded, her voice, her posture—scared. “Sorry to drop in without warning. I, um... heard you landed in the hospital. Thought I'd... check in.”

“Check in?” I heard myself say. “On me?”

“Annabel... er...” She shifted uncomfortably. “I didn’t... hear what happened, exactly. Just that you were here. So I... came.”

“You came. Here.” Something felt like bubbling, boiling syrup in my chest. My arms burned, out to my fingertips, tingling with the sensation. “You just up and disappear, just—just cut us all off like none of it ever even meant anything—and then you just *walk* right back in through the door saying *hey there* like everything’s cool?”

She winced. “I’m... sorry. I can go. Christ, I don’t know what I’m doing, I should have called, texted, anything, just—”

“*Should*, if we’re talking *should* then maybe you *should* have just told me if you wanted me out of your life completely,” I shot, my face burning now as I swiveled out of the bed. “Could have gotten lost earlier if that’s what you wanted.”

“Paisley—that’s not what I—”

It felt like she’d just punched me in the face. *Paisley*. Hearing her say my name *hurt*. It hurt in a completely unhinged *oh-my-god-make-it-stop-now* kind of pain that drove me out of my mind, and I couldn’t even let her finish. “Just—just—just *go* if it’s what you want,” I blurted. “I get it. You thought you were obligated to come back here, see me. Well, thanks, turns out I’m just fine, now you can fuck off back to Never Never Land again and just disappear—”

My voice cracked. I winced. Harper shrank under the blows, her hands up, and she swallowed hard. “All right,” she said, her voice small, beaten, broken. That wasn’t *fair*. Now I just wanted to cry, hug her. “I’ll go. Sorry. I just... I’m sorry.”

She turned back to the door, and I wanted to scream and cry and grab her and keep her here and tell her she was never allowed to leave again, but I couldn’t find it in me to do anything other than watch numbly as she left the room, shutting the door behind her. The blood pounded in my ears, and I felt regret drip thick and noxious in my throat, staring at a closed door wondering if it was a metaphor. A door shut in front of me, something I couldn’t get through.

I hated metaphors.

I stood up at some point, and my heart was racing as I staggered over to the window, looking out at the quiet garden path a story below. Harper went by only a second later, and I clenched my hands on the windowsill, watching her go.

Dammit. It really was her.

I pushed the window open wider, stepped into my slippers, and I vaulted out, dropping deftly into the bushes. My heart raced for a lot more reasons than just the exertion, coming down into the cool, quiet night, crickets chirping around us, the air damp and tasting like mulch, and Harper stopped, turning back to me before she did a double take.

“I—*Paisley?*”

“Who else jumps out of windows around here?” I stood up, brushing the leaves off of myself.

“I swear to—you’re *hospitalized*, you can’t go jumping out of windows like that.”

I took a step forward, onto the paved path, and I just... stopped, looking at her. “Oh my god, it is you.”

She winced again. Here in the low light of a garden lamp casting her in stark contrast from one side, she was just so... I don’t know. Something about seeing every feature of her face in sharp clarity, like... like it was Harper. *Harper.*

I’d missed her.

“I told you, I’m sorry—”

“You fucking idiot,” I said, and apparently I’d started crying, because my voice came out rough between tears, and I stepped forward and hugged her. “It’s not *that* hard to remember my number. It ends in three-three-three. That’s easy stuff.”

She tensed up, holding her hands up, and I prayed silently just *begging* in my mind for her to hold me, for her not to pull away. “Am I supposed to be bringing you back to your
—”

“Ugh, I’m fine. Honestly. Just a little malnourished. And Emberlynn would tell you overworked, but don’t listen to her.”

“Paisley...” She trailed off before, slowly, tenderly, she put her hands on my back, and it felt like pieces falling into place. Like everything was right and exactly where it was supposed to be.

Like I could breathe, dammit.

“I’m glad you’re all right,” she whispered. I sniffled, burying my face against her collar, and I stopped when I felt the solid shape of a pearl necklace underneath her shirt.

Dammit. This woman.

I gripped tighter at the sides of her jacket, and I managed to breathe out a sentence. “It’s... it’s nice to see you again.”

Chapter 23

Harper

I wasn't supposed to come here. Wasn't supposed to do this. I couldn't turn back, couldn't step on ground I'd already left, but I just... all sense had left me when I'd heard about her in the hospital. I'd been sick with worry that night I got Annabel's messages, picturing every horrible thing that could have happened. Every horrible thing that could have been happening.

So I'd told Susanna it was a personal emergency, took PTO. She was understanding—told me I could work remotely once I came off PTO too if I needed. And I'd been on a flight the next day, and the whole time, I hadn't paused for breath until my feet touched the ground.

Probably not even. Even after seeing Paisley, pale and sickly in a hospital bed, I still felt like I was lurching forward trying to catch myself. I don't think I actually stopped to take in reality until we were sitting side-by-side on the garden bench behind Dr. Hardy's clinic.

Me and Paisley. Here in Bayview. It should have been panic—and I think it was, under the surface somewhere—but above all else, she was okay. I felt like I'd cry with relief so thick it made it hard to breathe.

"Malnutrition?" I said, looking sidelong at her. "How do you even get to that point?"

"Ugh." She kicked at the dirt. She was so... it felt like she was the exact same as I remembered her and completely different all at once. She still had her blonde hair, and she was wearing her glasses right now along with a hospital gown, but above all else, there was just something... missing. Like her presence itself was gutted. Thin, wispy, like she was barely there. And not just physically. "I've been busy. Blame yourself."

“Me?”

“Well, yeah. You’re the one who ditched the place, and I had to learn on the spot how to keep it running.”

My head was spinning. It felt like something thick, moving slowly inside my skull, a fuzzy sensation blotting out my thoughts. “What do you mean?”

“What do you think? Your dumbass bakery. You should have told me laminating dough is such a pain, I’d have burned the place down.”

I stared at her, just... trying to put two and two together, incapable all of a sudden. This whole place—seeing Paisley again, all of it—it had me reeling. “You... you kept Crystal Lights open?”

“Well, yeah.” She hugged herself. It was a chilly night, the crisp fall air setting in as October went into its last week, and Paisley wasn’t exactly dressed for the outdoors.

But impossibly, I felt like if I let her go back inside, I’d never see her again. And I needed... I needed just a second longer.

“I mean, if I let it close, Anders wouldn’t be able to buy Nancy those cupcakes,” she said. “And Emberlynn would have nowhere to get her bread.”

“But—what about the bookstore?”

“Got help...” She shifted. “Oliver helps me run it. Connor and Will help out too, sometimes. Kay’s been spotting me some help in the bakery, too, here and there.”

She was running herself ragged. I’d worked for years in bakeries before running my own, and even then, it had almost taken me out completely jumping into opening my own. Paisley had just dived straight into the deep end. “No wonder,” I heard myself breathe, and she gave me a look.

“What? Quit looking at me like that. You clearly didn’t want to look at me at all anymore.”

The words were knives grazing all over me, but I took it in stride. I deserved it, anyway. I looked down at the ground.

“No wonder you haven’t been able to look after yourself.”

“Because I’ve been busting my ass, I know, I know. Emberlynn already gave me the spiel yesterday and she gave it to me today too. *You can’t work too hard, you’ll burn out.* Well, I’ll burn out if I don’t. Ugh.” She hunched forward, resting her elbows on her knees, and she was quiet for a while—the two of us sitting in an awkward silence with nothing but the rustling of leaves overhead—before she mumbled, “I don’t just want to... to... sit around and brood.”

Seemed like I wasn’t the only one who’d thrown herself into work as a coping mechanism. I swallowed. I deserved this—it was part of the fallout for what happened, for who I was—but Paisley was just getting unfairly caught in the crossfire.

Hearing Paisley complain about Emberlynn was too nostalgic. I wondered how Anders and Nancy were doing. Wondered if she could taste the difference between my cupcakes and Paisley’s.

Probably not. Paisley always had been good in the kitchen.

“But... you’re okay,” I said, quietly. “It’s not too severe?”

“No, yeah...” She scratched the back of her head. “I was majorly sleep-deprived, too, so I just wiped out on the floor yesterday afternoon. I’ll be okay. Doctor just says I need some time to rest and recover.”

“I’m glad you’re okay.” The words came out in a whisper, and Paisley clenched her fists tightly before she stood up.

“Sorry I dragged you out here for nothing, then, I guess,” she said, her voice distant in a way I wasn’t used to hearing from her. I stood up with her, and she took a step away.

“Don’t apologize. I chose to come out here. I’m the one who should... apologize.”

“How’d Annabel even get ahold of you?”

“Er... turns out she still had me as a contact on an app we haven’t talked on since we were dating.”

She snorted, her back to me. “Missed a spot while scrubbing your life of us lowly nothings, huh?”

“I... *Paisley*. It wasn’t—”

“Ugh, stop it. You can’t say my name like that. It’s banned. I’ve banned it. Not allowed.”

I paused. “I—”

“I’m freezing my butt off out here. Plus, the doctor’s probably going to get mad if she finds out I jumped out the window.”

“Well. You probably shouldn’t jump out of windows when you’re sick and hospitalized, but what do I know...”

“Oh, like you’re such an expert in jumping out windows?”

I scratched my head. “That’s very clearly you. Do you... need to get back inside?”

She sighed, hard, turning away. “No. Come with me.”

“What—where?” I stumbled a little keeping up with her, but she didn’t answer me. She didn’t need to—it was only five, six minutes’ walking before I knew exactly where we were going.

How had it only been six months? It felt like I was seeing a relic from a lifetime ago. The redbrick buildings and cobblestone streets, ornate wrought-iron railings tangled with ivy, streetlamps on the side of buildings and the occasional shopfront still lit up late at night—like I’d stepped into a time capsule. It was quiet right now, the taste of rain hanging in the air and a low breeze ringing distant windchimes, and I needed that quiet night right now—the fewer people knew I was here, the better. I had no plans for how long I was here, but I knew I needed to be gone as soon as possible.

In theory, maybe *as soon as possible* should have meant *once I know Paisley’s okay*, but I guess I had the answer already. I could have just left. She’d be fine. I’d be fine.

But I followed her, around the corner under a brick archway overgrown with moss and into the business block that I'd called home in my last life, around the picnic table and across the plaza, to the back door of Crystal Lights. Of my home. She pushed open the back door—she'd left it unlocked, because of course she did—and she led me inside.

She headed for the stairs, but she paused at the door into the bakery, pushing it open and peering through. The bakery floor was so nostalgic it felt like a knife to the heart—she'd kept it exactly the same. She'd been running it smoothly, too, from the looks of things, even if the stock was a bit lower than I kept it.

“Good,” she sighed, shutting the door again. “Looks like Fong dealt with the scorpion problem.”

I stopped. “The what problem?”

She perked up a little bit. “Oh, you know.”

“*Scorpions?*”

She laughed, giving me a sly look over her shoulder that felt like actually seeing *her* again—it ached deep in my soul, regret at having left and being reminded I needed to leave again, and soon. “Oh, your face right now is priceless. I'm just kidding.”

I sagged. “Glad to see you're doing okay enough for that, at least...”

“The walk did me some good,” she said, taking the stairs up ahead of me. “I'm fine, really. Emberlynn brought me a chicken burger and everything, got me the one from Brandy's. Remember when I used to be eating them, like, every day? Ranch dressing, extra pickles, and horseradish. Nothing like a... a...”

She got to the top of the stairs, and just like that, she pitched, staggering and falling against the wall, and she almost fell face-forward onto the floor before I caught her. My heart jumped into my mouth, my hands shaking suddenly, as she struggled to steady herself again. “Paisley—” I started, and she giggled, a small and distant sound.

“Wow... sorry,” she said, her voice like it was coming from miles away. “Little... little dizzy. Seeing spots. Just a little bit.”

“Oh my god. You are not *fine, really*. You—sit down and I’ll bring you something to eat.”

“I had a chicken burger,” she protested, her voice a whine, almost slurred, as I led her through the door into the living room.

“Right—you need sugar. Not just chicken burgers. Sit —” I guided her to the couch, and she slumped into it, her face ghostly white. My heart was pounding so hard I felt like I’d throw up, but I laid a hand on her shoulder, forcing myself to stay calm. “I’m putting on some tea, and I’m going downstairs to grab you something to eat. Okay?”

She gave me a look like I’d just descended from the heavens, really... not all there. “You’re kinda hot in a suit...”

I’d... process that later. I squeezed her shoulder. “I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere.”

“I’m not...”

I didn’t believe her. Luckily, it turned out she was telling the truth—I put on some water to boil, navigating the kitchen like I’d never left, since she hadn’t changed much in the time I’d been away, and I rushed downstairs into the bakery and picked through the chaos that was whatever system Paisley used for organization in the bakery kitchen and grabbed a couple pieces of pound cake. When I got back with the plate of cake and a cup of tea, Paisley was hunched into herself in the corner of the couch. She had a little more color back, but she was still entirely too pale, entirely too spacey.

“Here,” I said, setting them down in front of her.

“That’s too much work... feed me.”

This was hardly any time for inhibitions. I pulled off a piece of cake and I pressed it against Paisley’s lips, and it seemed to shock something in her back into awareness. She opened her mouth, taking the piece of cake, and she chewed it for a second longer than usual before she swallowed.

“Damn, you actually did,” she said, her voice sounding more coherent now. I sagged against the back of the couch.

“Yeah, because I’m scared to death you’re about to wipe out. You could tell me to put on a frilly maid uniform to bring you food and I would, at this point.”

She took another piece of cake. “Just jumping right into your newest fetishes, huh?”

I sighed. “Glad to see you’re well enough to be screwing with me again. Drink some tea, too.”

“Sheesh, snack police over here telling me what order to do what...” But she took a long sip of tea, and I saw the moment in her eyes when she realized how dehydrated she was, and she tipped back nearly the entire cup, going slowly but steadily until there was only a bit left, setting it down and coughing into the crook of her arm. I found my hand going to her back automatically, massaging her as she coughed a second time, harder, rubbing her chest.

“Better?” I said, and she nodded, wiping the crumbs and the tea away from her mouth.

“Ugh... yeah. Spots are starting to go away. That’s embarrassing.”

I felt the knot in my chest drop, uncoiling until I could breathe again. I sank forward in the couch, resting my elbows on my knees and hanging my head. “Scared me half to death, Pais.”

She looked down, and we were quiet for a minute before she murmured, “You’re, um... you’re wearing it.”

“Er...” I cleared my throat. Did she even remember calling me hot in my suit? “It’s just dress code at my new job. Well, the tie isn’t, but I like the look.”

“Not *that*.” She gestured to her collar. It took me a second to even place it—the necklace was such an ingrained part of me at this point that I forgot most of the time I had it on, tucked away under my shirt. My hand went to it automatically, and Paisley looked away. “Screwing with me,”

she muttered. “Wipe me out of your life altogether but keep the necklace. What kind of logic is that?”

“I... Paisley, I...” I shook my head. My thoughts were all so jumbled, so messy, melted and blurred together at the edges. “It’s not that I wanted to wipe every part of you from my life—”

“Then what is it, huh?” She rounded on me, fire in her eyes, and I wanted to shrink away. I held fast.

“It was keeping myself from coming back here,” I said, fixing my gaze straight ahead. “I... I left for a reason. And if I kept hearing from everyone... if I kept hearing from you... I’d come back.”

She watched me for a while, and I felt her gaze on me like ice pressing into my side, before she sighed, turning away. “But here you are. Back and everything.”

“Yeah. Was... worried about you.”

She hung her head, staring at the floor for a while before she took another piece of cake, popping it into her mouth. “Thanks,” she whispered. “It, uh... it means a lot that you did. Even though I’m mad at you right now.”

I couldn’t get into the complicated flurry of emotions that kicked up right now. I took a long breath. “Tell me you’re going to rest now? I should really be bringing you back to the clinic at this point... I’m going to have to call Doctor Hardy and tell her you jumped out the window and are laying low here.”

“I’ll text her. Relax.” She polished off her tea, setting the mug down lightly. “I need to get back to work ASAP, clear up the mess in the bakery—”

“Paisley. You’re getting yourself killed like this. Please.” I put a hand on her shoulder. “Just... just let me help.”

“I’m not a child. I can handle myself.”

“*Please.*”

She huffed, falling against the back of the couch, and she folded her arms. It was a quiet minute before she said, “How

long... are you here for?"

"Er—good question. I wasn't really thinking... just booked a flight here."

She laughed, a soft little sound, glancing out of the corner of her eye at me. "Dropped everything and ran, just for little old me?"

I cleared my throat. "She didn't give me any details, just that you were in the hospital. For all I knew, you could have been dying."

She looked away, tucking her hair back. "So you came running. Ugh... I can't believe it's you. Just... it's, uh... it's been a while."

Suddenly, I was balancing on a knife's edge, wanting to tip in the direction of Bayview and knowing I needed to go the other way. I steeled myself with a long breath. "I'm sorry... I don't want to. Honestly. But I need to go back eventually. Go back there and... and not look back."

She sighed, hard. "That scared of me? Just because I climb through the window?"

"It's not that."

She finished off one piece of the pound cake. She was eating faster now. It was a good sign. "Stay here tonight."

I shifted, a nervous energy buzzing in my chest. "I... I will. Yeah. I want to keep an eye on you. Make sure you're okay."

She snorted. "EM one night, Harper the next. Wonder who it's going to be on the third."

"Me." I spoke before I thought it through. Paisley looked over at me, but I kept my gaze straight ahead. "I'm not going anywhere until you're better. And I mean *actually* better."

She stared for a long time before she laughed, soft and sweet, sinking back against the corner of the couch. "That's kind of dumb."

"What?"

“You’re just incentivizing me to stay sick.”

“Hm. I’m not accepting that. I’m going to keep feeding you.”

She nudged me with her leg, a playful tap like she always used to do. It had been years, *years* we’d done this kind of thing—Paisley and I lived right across from one another for so long, and we’d only been apart for six months, but somehow it felt like she and I had just been a flash from so long ago. I couldn’t put a name to the sensation. “Don’t you have a job to get back to eventually?” she said. “Don’t tell me you got fired from your fancy cake place already.”

“Nah, I, uh... Susanna said I can work remote once I’m off PTO.”

She folded her arms, giving me a skeptical look. “Making cakes remotely, huh? That’s the future of bakery tech? That what they do in New York?”

“Oh.” I laughed, an awkward sound. I... hadn’t told Paisley a thing. I knew why I hadn’t, just... the whole thing felt wrong, weird, upside-down. “I, uh, I’m C-suite. I don’t actually do any baking.”

“Oh, what?” She raised her eyebrows. “You don’t bake anymore?”

“Did you... think I wear a suit to work in a bakery?”

She blinked. “You know something?”

“You hadn’t thought about—”

“I hadn’t thought about that.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Don’t you miss it?” She cocked her head. “Baking.”

I looked away. “Nah... not a ton. I like baking, but I like this, too. I still do cake decorating sometimes, doing the fancy stuff just so my name can be on it, but mostly I’m in an office.”

“Mm...” She looked down. “You’ve got a whole different energy. Turning into Aria.”

“New York gets through to you pretty quickly...”

“I don’t like it,” she whispered, the words slipping out like she hadn’t even meant to say it. I paused, raising my eyebrows.

“What, I’m too corporate for you now?”

She looked away. “There were already all these things I didn’t know about you... the longer you’re away, the more things pile up about you that I don’t know. I hate it.”

“Paisley—”

“I *hate* it. It’s not fair.”

I swallowed, my throat tight, but Paisley didn’t give me a chance to respond. She reached for her pocket—a pocket she didn’t have—and slapped at her leg.

“Uh... crap.”

“Just realizing you left all your things in the clinic.”

She laughed nervously, scratching her head. “Kind of just remembered EM was going to swing by and check on me... she’s gonna be a little worried if I’m just gone.”

“Jesus, Pais.” I stood up. “Woman’s going to think you’re dead.”

“Ugh.” She stood up slowly, and I didn’t even question the urge—I put my hands on her shoulders, guided her back to the couch.

“Sit. Rest. I’ll go get your things, tell Doctor Hardy I’m looking after you.”

She scowled. “I can walk—”

“Please, Paisley.” I squeezed her shoulders, and my voice came out softer than I’d meant. “I’m worried about you.”

Her expression softened, and maybe it was the low light from the table lamp casting a flame-colored glow over her face, but I swear she had a shimmer in her eyes. Misty.

“You’re such a sap,” she said, her voice a little thicker than usual.

“I’m really not.”

“You are for me,” she said, her voice light, almost teasing. I looked away, turning back to the door.

“Just... don’t want you passing out and falling down the stairs. Do you want me to brew you more tea before I go?”

“I can do *that* myself—”

“Ah—stay there.” I caught her with a raised finger as she moved to stand up. “I’m doing it.”

“Oh my god. My legs still work.”

“Uh-huh. I’m not listening.”

“You’re the worst!” she called after me into the kitchen as I set the kettle on to boil, and I just...

Well. I was a little weird in the head, because apparently I could get sentimental over a girl I had loved calling me the worst. A girl I still loved calling me the worst.

Guess I’d missed it.

Chapter 24

Paisley

Sunlight streamed in through the sheer, blush-pink curtains, casting squares of light stretched long over the bed. I stirred groggily against the morning haze, and my heart did flips when I turned and saw Harper sitting in the bed next to me. My thoughts scattered like a toppled house of cards seeing her, scrolling through her phone, wearing a casual shirt and pants now, and she glanced over at me when I moved, setting the phone down.

“Hey,” she said, her voice soft and sweet and actually honest-to-god her. So she hadn’t just been a fever dream. “Get some good sleep?”

“Harper?” I rubbed my eyes, covering a yawn.

“The one and only.”

“Mm... I had a dream I was trying to ride a horse but the horse kept wanting to walk on two legs and I’d fall off...”

She ruffled my hair. I felt like I died a little when she did. I hated how right Emberlynn was. The second Harper was here, it was like that dark haze was gone, like every little bit of life sparkled, felt right. “Well, lucky it was just a dream, and you don’t need to ride any creepy bipedal horses.”

I felt my stomach drop out, and I sat up in a rush. “Oh, god. What time is it?”

“Easy, Pais—”

I checked my phone by the bed. Seven twelve. I was going to have a heart attack. “Oh my god. The bakery—”

“*Paisley.*” Harper caught me by the arm as I moved to stand up, and I got a fluttery feeling as she pulled me back into bed. “Relax,” she laughed, eyes sparkling. “I swear, you as a workaholic who doesn’t eat enough and wakes up before sunrise... it’s hard to get my head around.”

I tugged against her hold, even though letting her pull me into bed and just spending all day here next to her sounded like paradise. “Harper. I’ve got to... the bakery...”

“I took care of it,” she said. “Kay helped out, too. She’s running the floor right now.”

I blinked fast. “The... the pull...”

“It wasn’t too bad, actually.”

“The croissants—”

“They’ll be fine. Spaced out the batches in the fridge. Stock might just be a bit slim for the next couple days, but they’ll be there.”

She was an angel. An actual angel descended from the heavens to save me from myself. Or maybe I’d died in the hospital and this was heaven.

No, I was definitely going to hell, so that ruled that one out. Which meant this was *real*.

I settled back into the bed next to her, the temptation winning out—all soft and warm and close to her, her warmth permeating through the sheets. “I never thought of just doing that...”

She laughed lightly. “Not my first bakery mishap. Had to do the same thing after I’d sprained my ankle and couldn’t work the next morning...”

“I’d forgotten about that.” I shifted. “The bookstore? Did they do the closing routine okay last night? Everything set for opening today?”

“Mm-hm. It’s all going okay, Pais.” She squeezed my arm. “You can rest.”

Maybe I could rest... that sounded nice. Here next to Harper? I didn’t want to work another minute of my life. I just wanted to cuddle her. Wanted to kiss her again...

I was probably supposed to still be mad at her, right? But she’d just come in here guns blazing the second she’d heard I was hurt, and she whisked me away to safety, fixed everything

for me... it was awfully romantic of her, for someone who wasn't going to be with me.

"Rest," I said, lying down, nestling closer to her side. "Yeah... I'm exhausted. I wasn't built for hard work. And by hard work I mean literally any. Can you imagine? Me, doing work? Ugh, no."

She laughed, brushing my hair back with one thumb. I loved it... felt like my heart would burst when she touched me like that. "Really, really can't. And you apparently did it almost to the point of taking yourself out. Want to get some more sleep?"

"Neh. I already slept in for ages. I think I'm good."

"If you say so. So... no pressure to eat if you don't have the appetite for it, but, breakfast?"

I'd almost forgotten I hadn't had any appetite. That was a different lifetime. Yesterday? I didn't know her. "I could murder a bowl of oatmeal. The instant kind. Cinnamon raisin."

She smiled softly, and she moved to stand up. "You got it," she said, and I reached out and caught her hand.

"Wait—I can make my own—"

"I know. But I want to do this for you."

Dammit, she was going to make me cry. Just a little. I was a grownup. But still. "Thanks, Harps," I said, squeezing her hand. She ruffled my hair again as she stood up, and I sank back into the sheets, pulling the blanket up higher as she got up.

"I'll be back in a flash. If you feel like you're going to fall back to sleep, let it happen."

"You're the best ever," I murmured, nestling into the pillows. "Love you."

She looked away, heading for the bedroom door. "Mm. Heard last night that I was the worst ever."

"You're that too. It's like yin and yang."

She shook her head, but I knew the dorky smile she had on even just seeing her from behind. “Love you too,” she said, opening the door and stepping through. I kept watching after her for a while, staring at the door, hearing her soft footsteps from beyond, and I just...

It was so corny. What kind of loser compared falling in love to a sunrise? But I had to admit, it was easy to take these feelings for granted while Harper was around. And when the sunlight all disappeared for six months, and then came back in a flash... kind of hard to hide from the truth then.

I cozied myself up in the bedsheets all wrapped up in my blankets listening to Harper in the next room moving around in my kitchen—*her* kitchen. Our kitchen? It had never made sense owning a house and renting the house facing it from across the street, but I couldn’t bear the thought of someone else coming and living in this place, stripping it of everything Harper had left here. It felt right with her back.

I perked up at the sound of the stairwell door opening in the next room, and I sat up groggily when I heard Emberlynn’s voice coming through.

“Hey,” she said, her voice low. “Glad to, uh... glad to see you’re still here.”

I heard Harper slide a drawer shut. “I told you, I’m staying until she’s better.”

I felt like I’d cry. I never wanted to be better, if that was what she was saying. But... just the fact that I could hear her talking to Emberlynn, it was healing a wound I hadn’t realized was a wound.

“Is she still asleep?” Emberlynn said.

“She woke up a bit ago, but she’s probably drifted off again... I’m making her breakfast. Seems to be doing better. Asked for oatmeal and everything.”

“Thank god.” Emberlynn’s voice was so laced with worry. I felt a little sick. Hadn’t really... thought about how it would affect other people. Not that I ever thought of anyone

but myself. “Um... thank you, Harper. For coming back. Looking after her.”

Harper sighed, and I heard the beep of the kettle going off. The sound of hot water pouring. After a long pause, she said, “Missed her. Missed you. Missed this town...”

“Stay, then.”

“I can’t, Emberlynn.”

“At least stay in touch.” Emberlynn’s voice cracked, broken around the edges. Felt like she was speaking to my soul. I felt a little weird eavesdropping, but... I couldn’t take my ears off the conversation. “I get you wanted a clean start, but... it doesn’t look like it’s been healthy for you. And I know it’s not healthy for her.”

Harper sighed. Emberlynn went on in a softer voice.

“She loves you.”

“Told me last night I was the worst for making her tea,” Harper said lightly. I huffed. As if that wasn’t how I said I loved her.

“And you love her, too,” Emberlynn said.

“Emberlynn... as nice as it is to see you, is there a reason you’re here?”

Emberlynn laughed. “Grabbing my bread for the day. Just thought I’d come up here and say hi while I was in. And check on Pais.”

“You can see her if you want to.”

“I’m not interrupting your time together,” Emberlynn said, and I felt my face prickle. It wasn’t like I didn’t want it, just... just... I couldn’t bear the thought of everyone knowing how I felt about Harper. Even though I think everyone knew how I felt about Harper. “Tell her I said hi, okay? And that I’m glad she’s doing better.”

“Will do. Oh—what’s the bread today?”

Emberlynn laughed. “Ciabatta. Doing a kind of... croque monsieur. Aria’s at that point in her period where she’s craving

as much cheese as she can get in her stomach, so...”

“Heading over to Hogshead after?”

“Going to clear their shelves. It’s the least I can do for her.”

Harper laughed. “Tell her I said hi, too. And that I hope the cheese helps.”

The coffeemaker beeped a second after Emberlynn had left, too, and it wasn’t long before Harper’s footsteps came towards the door, knocking twice before she pushed it open and stepped inside. I shifted in the bed to look like I’d dozed off a bit, feigning waking up as she came over with a tray, stocked with coffee and oatmeal and buttered toast with jam, and she slipped into the bed and set it down between us.

“Breakfast in bed,” I laughed, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. “I need to pass out more often.”

“You have people around you who will spoil you if you ask.”

I harrumphed, taking a spoonful of oatmeal. “It’s not the same. I want *you* spoiling me.”

She looked away. I wasn’t feeling guilty, though. I had every right to talk about how damn much I wanted her in my life.

“Thanks for the breakfast,” I said.

“Feeling better about eating?”

“Better by miles.” I took a bite of the toast, too—I hadn’t asked for it, but it was knock-your-socks-off good and I was ready to marry her for bringing it to me. Maybe I should have asked her to marry me. We made good wives. “This is the peach-mint jam again, isn’t it?”

She gestured airily. “You said you liked it...”

I wiped the crumbs from my mouth. “What’s it like?”

“Peachy and minty, primarily. And sugary. Bit of pectin.”

“The new job. What do you do, anyway?”

“Oh...” She cleared her throat, looking down. I sipped the coffee, content to wait, and eventually, it got a mumbled answer out of her. “This and that... I do a lot of interoperations logistics, so I’m all over the place. I like it that way, though.”

“So you like the job?”

“Yeah, well enough. Pays well, too. Plus, it’s a win for anyone who likes fancy parties... just got to say hi to the mayor of New York City the other day.”

“Holy crap.”

“Nothing more than saying hi, though. Chitchatted with some construction execs, mostly. That’s generally what it comes down to... catering to rich people’s tastes, sucking up to them, making them feel important. I don’t mind it, though.”

I looked down. “Um... making a lot of new friends there?”

She didn’t say anything. I sipped my coffee again, playing the waiting game, and once again—as always—I won. “Paisley... I really shouldn’t be talking too much about—”

“*Should* never stopped me. Now spill it.”

She hung her head, a dry smile on her lips. I loved that little tired smile thing she did. I wanted to hold her for the rest of time. “It’s a busy place. I know a lot of people, and I like them, they like me, but it’s kind of... arm’s-length.”

“Because you keep it that way.”

She pursed her lips. I set the coffee down, shifting the tray to my other side and clearing up the space between us, and I shifted over to her side. I put a hand on hers in her lap, lacing my fingers between hers, and I was relieved to see her breath still tightened, her pulse still quickened when I did that.

“Harper... please tell me what happened.”

“You know what happened. I moved out of here—”

“With her.”

She sighed, sharp and pointed, looking away. “By the way, Emberlynn said hi—”

“I know. I eavesdropped.”

“I—just like that?”

“Tell me what happened. Please.”

“I *can't*. It's not right.”

I squeezed her hand. “If you're going to leave, what does it matter? Just get it off your chest. And then... then... then you go back to your other life, leave me behind, but you've at least said it. To *someone*. And you need that. Come on, admit it. It's been eating you alive, hasn't it? How long have you been keeping it to yourself?”

She sucked in a long, shaky breath, and she flipped her hand over underneath mine, holding onto mine and squeezing. She didn't look at me, just breathing out slowly, weakly, before she spoke in a strained, distant voice. “Ten... years.”

Okay. I could work with this. I caressed my thumb in small, tight patterns on the side of her hand. “Can you... at least tell me her name?”

She didn't say anything.

“Have you... said her name? To anybody?”

Mutely, she shook her head. I squeezed tighter, dropping my voice to a whisper.

“I promise I won't tell anybody. You're safe here.”

She whispered something I couldn't catch. I shifted closer.

“Say that again?”

“Lindsay.” Her voice was rough, gravelly.

“Lindsay?” She nodded, and I squeezed her hand again. “Oh, great. I love that name.”

She winced at me. “Really?”

“Yeah. Tried to write a book once. Couldn't finish the first chapter, but the main character's name was Lindsay.”

She laughed oddly, cocking her head. “When... was that?”

“Oh, pff...” I cast my gaze to the ceiling. “Damn, I don’t know. It was close to when I opened the bookstore, so it’s been ages. Used to be way more into reading then.”

“Guess that explains why you opened a bookstore.”

“Yeah, kinda let the reading habit fall by the wayside, but I like the bookstore. Writing turned out to not be for me, though. Anyway, Lindsay had purple hair and glowing eyes and she could read people’s minds, so, you know, real main-character type.”

She laughed, but it was such a small thing, weak, like she was barely there. This poor girl. “So what you mean is that you wrote it when you were fourteen.”

“Mentally, emotionally, that’s about how old I was, yeah.” I sipped my coffee again, giving the topic some space to breathe, before I said, “So... what was she like?”

She let out a ragged breath. “Quiet... kind of kept to herself. Bit moody. Complained about a lot of things. Picked fights and then ran away from them.”

“Okay, that last part, I empathize with.”

“C’mon,” she laughed, nudging me lightly, but it was a thin veneer over the nerves she was drowning in. “She... well, we never got on too well, I guess. Mom wasn’t...” She made a face. I sipped my coffee, letting her finish, but she didn’t say anything.

“Lindsay... was she your sister?”

She squeezed her eyes shut tightly, balled her fists, and nodded, I put my coffee down and massaged her back gently, slowly up and down. It kind of blew my mind realizing I’d never really... done this with her before. Consoling her. Talking her through painful things. Helping her find peace. Had she even opened up about painful things once?

She had now.

“Older or younger?” I said, my voice low.

“Younger. Three years.”

“What kind of things did she like?”

She laughed, once, breathless, streaked with pent-up tears. “Um... good question. Honestly? Probably those tacky novels you were working on with purple-haired glowing-eyed mind-reading protagonists...”

“Oh, perfect,” I said, squeezing her. “Then I was just channeling her a little. Got a little piece of her right there, in an old document.”

She shook her head, letting out a shaking breath. “Nah... she’s gone.”

There was so much... more to it than just what met the eye. I squeezed her hand. “I’m sorry about your sister.”

She shook her head again, quiet, eyes closed. “These things happen.”

“How old were you?”

“I was...” She screwed up her face. “I was seventeen.”

“That has to be a horrible age to lose someone at.”

She scoffed. “Like there’s a good age?”

“I mean, no, but... I feel like you’re really caught between a rock and a hard place then. Old enough to feel responsible for things and young enough to be, you know, a fragile little mess like kids always are. That’s awful.” I looked down. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“It’s my fault,” she breathed—the words just slipping out, like she didn’t mean to say it. I paused, looking over at her, but she turned, sliding up to her feet.

“Harper—”

“Can we not talk about this? I need some air.”

She moved for the door, and I didn’t think—I never did—I just moved, lunging and grabbing her by the hand.

“There’s something else I wanted to ask,” I said. She looked back with a pained expression.

“What...?”

“Um... the picture frame,” I said. “Did you keep it?”

“Oh.” She relaxed, turning back to the window. “Yeah. I, uh... thank you. For the gift. I keep it on my desk.”

That was all I’d ever needed to hear. Suddenly I was happy and healthy and I could run and jump and dance around.

Dammit, Emberlynn was right. I hated when she was.

“What did you end up using?” I said. “For the photo.”

She smiled lightly at me. “None of them. I just put a cat picture in it.”

“I’m gonna start screaming until you tell me the real answer.”

She laughed, looking away again, a little... a little blush creeping over her cheeks. I’d missed that so much it was unreal. “None of the ones you took.”

“What, seriously? After I worked so hard on them?”

“Remember when we grabbed burgers from Jeremy’s and just sat on the overlook near the Rove estate?”

I slumped. It was a beautiful vista of Bayview from there, but I’d kind of been... hoping it was a picture of us. I know it didn’t make sense to hope for that when she’d been trying to forget me, but I’d thought maybe if she was wearing the necklace... “Nah. Wiped that from my memory when I found out Jeremy’d skimped on my pickles.”

“Well, imagine that happening. Took a picture there.”

It was probably gorgeous. I was just jealous of a Bayview scenery shot. I settled back in the bed. “Can we go out for dinner somewhere today?”

She gave me a look. “What, starting a new bucket list?”

I sure was. I went with a clever excuse, being the Machiavellian master manipulator I was. “I just think I’d be more up to eating a proper meal if it was a whole thing, you know? Go out, order food, make it an experience.”

She hesitated, looking me over. “Will you be... okay to go out?”

I beamed. “You’ll catch me if I fall.”

She blushed again, and it was even better than I remembered it. She turned away. “I’m not carrying you,” she said.

“Yeah, you will. So, it’s a yes?”

“What do you want for dinner?”

“Japanese. Hinomoto?”

“Sure... sounds good.” She gave me the softest, sweetest smile, and it ached like I’d break in half just how totally I was in love with this damn woman with one foot out the door. “I’m going to help Kay downstairs, but... get some rest. I’ll get us a reservation.”

Hinomoto wasn’t so popular that we’d need reservations on a Thursday evening, but something about her booking us a table made it more romantic, so I was in. “You’re the very best in all the world ever.”

“Mm-hm. Sure thing, Pais. See you,” she laughed, heading out the door, and she gave me one last loaded look on her way out.

Sharing was good for her. I knew... I knew she was going to leave again. But I’d get the story out of her before she did.

For both of us. And for Lindsay, too.

Chapter 25

Harper

“Again... thank you,” I said, and Kay beamed, dusting her hands off and putting them on her hips. She didn’t suit the place here quite as well as she did with the eye-popping color scheme of the bubble tea place, but she’d gotten comfortable with the bakery and looked at home in the dark apron.

“Thank *you*. For coming back. Pais needed it.”

I looked away. “I told you, I’m just passing through.”

Kay’s shoulders slumped as she looked around the bakery, closed down for the day and cleaned up for tomorrow. “You know... she doesn’t feel this way about just anyone.”

I put a hand to my forehead. “Is this the price for getting your help with the bakery? I need to listen to you talk about my love life?”

She grinned. “I mean, you’re not the one paying me for the shift, so I think that’s a reasonable price to ask of you.”

I folded my arms, sinking back against the counter. It was an odd sensation, how nostalgic this place had been—how easy it was to slot back into working the bakery, as if I’d never left. “How is Paisley as a boss, anyway?”

“Um... well, diligent, sharp-eyed, keen attention to detail. Which is weird, because it’s Paisley, and I’m like... who are you?”

I smiled drily. “Yeah... I am seeing that.”

“But it makes sense,” she sighed. “Pais was always scared of trying. Of people seeing she cared about something. It’s scary being that vulnerable, you know? I get that it was hard for her to be herself.”

So she’d said. And it made sense. But—was *this* her? I couldn’t get the thought out of my head, like a bad itch. I couldn’t afford to let myself dwell in it, though. I had to go

back... back to four small walls in a dimly lit apartment complex, back to a little window overlooking an alleyway crowded with fire escapes and the sound of trucks growling by at two in the morning when I couldn't sleep.

"You're changing the subject," Kay said, a hand on her hip. "I know you two love each other."

"It's not—" I started, and I jolted at a voice from behind me.

"It definitely is," Annabel's voice said, and I spun back on where she came in from the stairwell, a letter in her hand. I forced my thoughts back into line, glowering at her.

"Annabel, we're closed. How did you even—"

"Paisley hasn't locked the back door since the day you left. We've mostly gotten used to just going in whichever door is closer." She stopped in front of me, giving me a once-over with an odd smile on her face. "It really is you, huh?"

I looked away. The sight of Annabel, still the same as ever with that cocky, easy smile on her face, one hand in her pocket, hair falling messy just a bit too long and getting in her eyes—she'd always put off getting it cut. I'd kind of thought having a responsible girlfriend would clean her up.

"Could at least say hi," she said, holding the letter out towards me. "Hand this to Pais, would you?"

"So I'm just good for errands?"

"Apparently I'm not good enough for a hello."

I sighed, hanging my head. "Sorry. It's... it's weird, being back here. Seeing..." I shook it off. "Long time no see, Annabel. Hope you're, uh... hope you're doing well."

Annabel sighed. The heavy weight over everything, it felt like it dulled everything to a sad gray, where... well, not Kay, though. I didn't think anything dulled her.

"Things are good," she said, finally. "Priscilla's really stepped up in her final year of university. Looking like she's going to be traveling a while with her new sports club, so I'm going to miss her like hell, but I made her promise to come

back all the time. And I believe she'll actually keep that promise, unlike some people."

"Ah." So she had decided what she was doing after graduation. Gone ahead and figured things out without me, just like I'd hoped—that people could be okay without me. Why did I not feel relieved?

Kay nudged Annabel. "C'mon, don't take cheap shots. She's here right now."

Annabel looked down with a grunt of frustration. "Sorry, Harps. I, uh... I'm happy to see you again. How long are you here?"

"Until Paisley's better."

Kay hunched her shoulders. "I'm trying to get her to admit that she's in love with Paisley to get her to stay, but she's being difficult."

"I'm not in love with anyone," I said, a thick feeling in my throat. Annabel raised her eyebrows.

"Who are you kidding? Why do you think I contacted you about Paisley in the hospital?"

"I—"

"You're here because you love her. Don't be difficult. To think, you always called me the difficult one." She pushed the letter in my direction again. "Now, take the letter, and give it to your wife."

I had to... wonder what Lindsay would have done in this situation. She'd run headlong into this, admit she loved Paisley, throw away New York and stay here with the people she loved...

But I wasn't Lindsay. I was Harper.

Still. Never thought I'd imagine Lindsay doing something like that.

I took the letter. "You could hand it to Paisley yourself," I said. "She's upstairs, just resting."

Annabel put a hand up. “I don’t want to interrupt your private time.”

Why everybody was referring to it like that, as if it was this salacious thing... I pushed the thought away. “And what, you can’t text her?”

“Things always work differently when Paisley’s involved.” She relaxed, shoving her hands in her pockets and giving me a loaded smile. “You know... as much as I love her, Crystal Lights just isn’t the same with Paisley running it.”

“I wonder what you’re getting at,” I sighed. Kay elbowed me.

“She’s saying you should stay here and run the bakery instead.”

“Okay—yes, I got it.” I shook my head. “Um... thanks for dropping by, Annabel. It’s nice to see you again.”

“Quit it with that,” Annabel said, holding a hand up as she turned for the door. “Just behave yourself. Oh, and come to swim practice while you’re at it.”

“I—”

“You too, Kay. I’ll be expecting you on Friday.”

Kay saluted smartly. “I’ll be there!”

I gave Kay a look as Annabel headed out of the building. “What, finally learned to swim?”

She laughed. “A little. Got out of the kiddie pool, at least. So... what are you doing with your day now? Spending it snuggled up with your girlfriend nursing her back to health?”

I looked away. If she knew we were going out for dinner... “I’ll be checking in on my job. Remotely. From upstairs, where Paisley can call if she needs help and I can make sure she’s not dying. That’s all.”

She winked, turning away with a pep in her step. “Uh-huh. Well, enjoy. By the way, Gwen’s hosting boardgame night again tomorrow night, so if you’re still here for it...”

“I’m not going to all the events,” I said, but I might as well have been talking to the wind—she skipped lightly from the room, leaving me in the dark, closed-down bakery.

Maybe I should have locked that damn back door. But... this was Paisley’s bakery now, not mine. I couldn’t do that kind of thing for her.

Paisley’s bakery. Who would have thought the day would come?

When I got back upstairs, I stepped into the living room, where the warm autumnal sunlight spilled in long rectangles from the windows and stretched across the coffee table and the couch, where Paisley lay with her nose in a book and her blonde hair, dark roots starting to show, falling in messy waves around her head. She looked up from the book, and the transformation in her face when she saw me—the shift from a bored halfway-there look to that brilliant glowing smile—it ached like something lodged in my chest.

“Hey, you,” she said, tossing the book aside. Pop science guide to quantum physics, apparently. Who knew what it would be next with Paisley? She propped herself up on her elbow, turning to face me. “Thought it was, like, Aria or something coming to harass me when I heard the door open. Figured I’d just start howling until she left.”

“I can’t tell you how flattered I am to not get the howling treatment.”

“You should be flattered. I like you a lot. That’s rare from someone as cynical and blackhearted as I am.”

“Uh-huh...” I handed over the letter. “Annabel’s going old-school and wrote you a letter.”

“Oh, sweet,” she said, sitting up and taking the letter. “Must be the updates on the gutter cheese situation.”

I paused. “The... what situation?”

She didn’t look up from where she was tearing the letter open. “Decided to try out making cheese in a gutter. You know, help develop a seasoned rind.”

I stared.

“I’m kidding. I have no clue what the letter is.”

“I actually kind of believed it, coming from you.”

She grinned, and her smile faded once she slid the letter out, scrunching up her face in confusion—and then a small, soft smile before she put it back. I frowned.

“What is it? Are you and Annabel exchanging love letters?”

She set the letter down gently, reverently. “Oh, what’s that? Are you getting jealous at the thought of me with Annabel?”

“I—” I folded my arms, looking away. “I’m just curious what it was.”

She fell back in the couch, kicking one foot up on the coffee table. “It’s a love letter.”

“Uh-huh.” I ignored the sick feeling in my stomach.

“I mean, her girlfriend is going to be traveling for months. We know she’s going to find a dozen girls to keep her company here in Bayview.”

“You *are* joking, right?”

“What, you don’t think I’m hot enough for Annabel? She hit on me the first time we met.”

“Yeah—I know.” I rubbed my forehead. “If you don’t want to tell me what’s in the letter, you can just say.”

She laughed, folding her hands behind her head. “I already did. It’s a love letter. Written for a little bird come to the stables to roost on the broad side of the barn.”

She’d gotten worse at figures of speech. “I’m glad you seem to be feeling better,” I sighed, and she dropped her arms, looking away, a serious expression creeping over her face.

“Oh, yeah... definitely feeling more myself. And I appreciated the break today.”

I sat down on the couch next to her, resting forward with my elbows on my knees, looking down at the floor. A sick, anxious feeling churned in my stomach, and I tried not to think about it too much right now. “When even was the last time you took a break?”

“Oh, pff...” She shrugged. “Probably, like, neolithic.”

“I see you’ve been reading up on earth history in between your quantum mechanics.”

She looked away. “It’s, uh, it’s been a couple weeks. I’ve just had stuff going on. And it’s not like you can blame me. You used to work every single day running Crystal Lights too.”

“I didn’t run a bookstore on top of it. And I’d trained in bakeries for a long time before that.”

She hunched her shoulders. “Well. Paisley the overachiever.”

“That’s just it. I barely recognize you anymore.”

She stuck her tongue out. “I know. I learned how to change myself. And that was with your help. So you have no one to blame but yourself.”

“And you like being this?”

“Uh.” She scrunched up her face, looking down. “Well... I guess maybe this hasn’t been super healthy for me.”

I couldn’t even keep track of what I was saying—words tumbled out of me in a breathless race. “If you felt empowered to change yourself but all it meant was that you changed yourself to fit what other people want from you—that’s not the kind of positive legacy I was hoping to leave here.”

She let out a huff, elbowing me lightly, but it was without the usual playful tone—her expression drawn tight, a distant look in her eyes. “Look, I’m not one to assign blame, but you should know I blame you. I mean... why the hell do you think I’ve been working all the time? I told you it’s to stop me from thinking. What do you think I’m thinking about?”

I looked away. Paisley didn’t let up.

“It’s *you*. I’m thinking about how you make me feel alive and feel like myself in a way I’ve never gotten anywhere else, and how I don’t... I don’t want to know what my life looks like without you in it.”

“Paisley—”

“I mean, *sure* I could go and find someone else or just be happy single or *whatever*. And I could live life like that. And it could probably be fine. But nothing is going to fill that void you left by just... disappearing without a trace. Wiping me out of your life altogether and not even telling me why.” She stood up with a sigh, her shoulder slumped. “It’s one thing if you have to go and be happy somewhere else. But you’re not happy either. It doesn’t make any sense, Harper.”

“I’m—” I stood up with her, but that sad little look she gave me had me stilled before I could say another word.

“When I told you I love you,” she whispered, “I meant it. Every single time.”

I swallowed, a hot sensation pressing against me. My breath was tight in my throat, and I couldn’t form words. Paisley looked away.

“And I still do,” she whispered. “And the hardest part is... the hardest part is never knowing if you meant it too. And never being able to ask. No, this isn’t what I want to be. It’s what I have to be while I... while I get over you. I swear,” she said, picking the letter up off the table. “You’re the worst.”

I did mean it. I wanted to say it—put the words out there and make everything better—but it wasn’t right. It wasn’t me. I loved her, but... but it wasn’t me.

“I have heard that,” I said, trying to sound casual, looking away. “That I’m the worst.”

She stopped in the doorway, giving me that soft little sad smile that broke my heart even more. “You are. But I still love you. I, um... I know you’re probably leaving tomorrow... so I’m looking forward to dinner. Even though you’re the worst. And I’m going to take a shower at my house before we go.”

My chest tightened, an aching feeling there, but... it made sense Paisley would be able to read the thoughts coalescing in my heart before I even realized them. I swallowed, putting on a smile.

“Me too,” I said. “Even though I’m the worst. Have a nice shower. I’ll take one here and we can go.”

She smiled at me before she shut the door, leaving me alone in the living room, where the tree branches dressed in their dark red and gold autumn leaves rapped lightly against the window, drumming on like they were waiting for something, waiting for nothing, waiting for me.

Chapter 26

Paisley

I turned in front of the mirror, touching my hair. “How do I look?”

“You look good,” Emberlynn said, leaning back against the edge of my bed. “But you looked good in the last five outfits too. I think maybe you just need to commit to something.”

I took a stuffed lizard from the shelf and threw it at her. She barely even looked, just catching it absently. She and Aria had been playing tennis more lately, and I was having less and less luck throwing things at her. “Ugh, you don’t get it. This is serious stuff. I need to look extra, extra, extra good.”

She gave me a tired smile. “You’re going to have to tell me. You know what Harper likes better than I do. I’m still not sure why she’s in love with you.”

“Ugh.” I turned my back to her, hunching my shoulders. “You really think she is?”

I’d meant it as a snarky comment, but it came out in a soft voice like I just didn’t... didn’t know if I dared to hope that. Emberlynn walked past me, putting the lizard back on the shelf, and she sighed. “I know for a fact she is,” she said. “She wouldn’t have come back here like this for just anybody.”

I looked down, fussing with the dress—that same red minidress I’d worn for our treehouse date. Because it was obvious *now* that they were dates, just... obvious too late. “She didn’t say...” My voice felt tight, strangled in my throat, hard to push out words. I wanted to scream in frustration. I thought I’d moved *past* this—thought I’d learned how to say the things on my mind, how to be the things I wanted. “She didn’t say so...” was all I managed, and Emberlynn put a hand on my arm.

“She’s a delicate woman. More than she looks.”

“I know.” I shifted. “Just... when we were talking earlier, I said... said how...”

I trailed off, and an awkward silence settled over us. Eventually, Emberlynn picked the lizard back up off the shelf.

“Spit it out,” she said. “Or the lizard gets it.”

“You can’t do that.” I reached for the lizard, but she held it just out of reach. “Oh my god, give me back Jerome.”

“Jerome is a hostage now. Tell me what you’re saying.”

“You monster,” I huffed, folding my arms, looking away. “Okay, well, if you *want* to know, I told her that I’d meant it all those times I said I loved her. And what did she say? Absolutely nothing. What am I supposed to take away from that? So—so really, I don’t know why I’m bothering,” I said, my voice getting thick and hot now, words coming too fast to sound natural no matter how I tried. “Now put Jerome back on the shelf where he goes.”

“Hm.” She set Jerome back on the shelf where he went, and she looked out the window, the sill crowded with my junk. “I think what to take away from that is that she’s scared of being in love with you.”

“I’m gonna try that. Just ask people if they’re in love with me, and if they say no, it’s because they’re scared of how much they’re in love with me.”

She shoved me playfully. “Take this seriously, dammit. Isn’t it obvious? It’s because if she tells you she loves you, then she stays. And for some reason, she’s convinced she can’t stay.”

“I... I don’t know.”

“She didn’t come back for anything in Bayview. She was prepared to cut everything off and become a different person. But she came back for you. That means something.” She shrugged. “Means that she’s in conflict between her feelings for you and her need to get away. So looking at it that way, why *wouldn’t* she hide her real feelings?”

I shifted from one foot to the other, an awkward sensation churning in my gut. I couldn't find words—everything slippery and hard to get my head around—when a knock came from the door, and I whipped my head to look.

“Oh my god, this is my bedroom. Who has the nerve to just walk into my house?”

“Literally, you of all people—” Emberlynn started, but I ignored her. Worse still, it was Aria's voice from outside the door.

“I wonder,” Aria said. “Maybe you'll forgive me if you know I brought cake.”

“Oh.” I dropped my arms, turning back to the door. “Aria, my favorite sister in the world, I am so sorry for my outburst. Please, do help yourself to, uh... putting the cake in the kitchen and leaving.”

She came into the bedroom, the asshole. “Hey,” she said with a soft smile. “Wanted to check in on you. You seem like you're doing better.”

“I thought you were immobilized by your period right now and craving as much cheese as you could fit in your body.”

Emberlynn put her hands on her hips. “You were eavesdropping on Harper's and my—”

Aria put a hand up. “I'm on a lot of painkillers right now. We don't all collapse wailing to the heavens when we're on our periods.”

Emberlynn looked away. “If you're going to call out Paisley, you might as well not call me out at the same time... I'm your girlfriend.”

Aria smiled sweetly at her. “It's not a problem when you're doing it, sweetheart. It's just weird when it's Paisley slumped over our couch complaining she wants chocolate.”

“I don't know why I talk to either of you,” I said, looking away. “Ugh, leave me be. I'm trying to get dressed for

a dinner date. Actually—Ar, you might as well make yourself useful for something. Is this dress good?”

Aria gave me a once-over. “It’s a cute look. Pair it with a dark jacket or a coat, something large and a little shapeless, to contrast it. Especially if you get some wool or another contrasting texture... and those red heels from Bright Star. Small clutch.”

I folded my arms. “It’s the shoulder bag or bust.”

She put her hands up. “Okay, the shoulder bag then. Whatever makes you happy. Just don’t do the cross-body with that outfit.” She paused, giving me a careful look, a guarded smile on her lips. “I’m sure Harper will love it,” she said, and I swallowed, looking away.

“Ugh, you both. You’re putting so much pressure on me that I’m going to cry if she doesn’t...”

Emberlynn shrugged. “I think that’s healthy. To cry when you care about someone and they leave.”

Aria gestured, moving one hand lazily in the air. “I think that’s what happens when you love someone. You care. And I believe I may have said it once already that it makes you a little... uncool.”

I sighed. “Ar, where’s the cake?”

“I left it in the kitchen.”

“Great.” I pulled open the dresser drawer and tugged on a long, black wool coat, turning in the mirror to check the fit, and I slid my favorite bag up over one shoulder, and I picked up the red heels from Bright Star, tucking them into my bag. I walked past Emberlynn, and they realized my strategy too late—I heard Emberlynn’s voice strangled behind me as I threw open the window and climbed out, easing myself down to hang from the ledge, and I dropped down into the back garden, landed softly on the grass, and hoisted myself over the fence. I touched down barefoot on the path just as Gwen walked past, pausing and arching an eyebrow at me, her phone up to her ear.

“One second,” she said. “Paisley just dropped from the sky.” She lowered her phone. “Are you on the run from something dangerous?”

“Just my sister.” I knelt, pulling my heels on. “I probably lost her, though. She’s too dignified to climb walls.”

“Has too much common sense, more like. Seriously? Even when you’re in a dress? You were hospitalized *yesterday*.”

I stuck my tongue out. “I’ve got a date to get to. Um...” I finished getting my heels on, standing up and tugging my shoulder strap up higher. “Wish me luck, okay? If Harper leaves again, I, uh... I’m going to be insufferably sad for a while.”

She stared at me for a while before she relaxed into a small smile. “Good luck,” she said, and when a voice came from her phone, she gestured it in my direction. “Nancy says good luck, too.”

“What, why are you on the phone with Nancy?”

“She’s helping me organize the game night tomorrow. Ostensibly. Practically, she’s crowing about how she beat Ms. Connelly’s reading this month.” A voice chattered from the phone, and Gwen half-listened. “Yeah, yeah... it was in a complimentary way.” She covered up the microphone, glancing back at me. “She says you and Harper are good together. You know how she claims she’s a matchmaker.”

I scrunched up my face for a second before I relaxed, laughing nervously. “Well, I guess if Nance says so. Can’t disagree with the volleyball superstar.” I checked my phone. “Okay, I gotta bounce. I’ll bring Harps to game night tomorrow or die trying.”

I had a lift in my step as I rounded the corner, went down the street, and ducked close to the wall as a rumble came from overhead—distant thunder. I’d left my umbrella in my backpack, and God only knew where that thing was. But I got to the dark-red roof of Hinomoto, the Japanese steakhouse with a cute little garden out front and low lights that made

Harper look like something from a dream in the soft, romantic glow, standing inside the antechamber, her hands in the pockets of her suit jacket. I paused for just a second looking at her, taking her in, and I wanted to kick myself.

It was so damn obvious I was in love with her. The way all my thoughts orbited around her, how it felt like I was only *me* when she was with me—like the sun had risen, and the world was bright.

If I'd realized it earlier, maybe she would have stayed.

And maybe she would have kept hiding everything about herself, like she had with Annabel. And she would have shrunk away more and more, like she did with Annabel, and eventually step away and leave after all.

I was gawking at her. I opened the door, stepped inside, and Harper glanced over at me and—I was such a sucker for that light that came into her eyes when she saw me.

“Hey,” she said, coming over to catch me at the door, reaching automatically to take my coat as I took it off. What a gentlewoman. I felt a little giggly. “You were able to make it okay? Still feeling all right?”

“Oh, yeah. I jumped out my bedroom window and climbed the fence.”

She faltered. “Paisley...”

“Aria was bugging me. But she did leave me a cake, so... we can have dessert together, too.”

She hung her head. “What is it going to take for you to be safe?”

I didn't hesitate. “You staying here and letting me love you.”

“I...” She raked her fingers back through her hair, looking away, but she took my coat and turned back to the next door. “Let's get inside. Our reservation was a minute ago.”

I went with her into the dining area, where Kim at the host's stand beamed at both of us—we didn't have to say a

word, and she greeted us warmly, taking two menus and leading us through the dining floor and into the back, where I just *knew* Nancy's son Kyle who ran the shop had gotten excited having Harper back and making a reservation here, because we'd scored the best table in the restaurant. It was walled off a little from everything else, by an octagonal window looking out on the courtyard, and I felt fluttery at the bouquet of roses on the table.

"You two sit down and make yourselves comfortable," Kim said, setting our menus down. "Your waiter will be right with you."

"Er..." Harper scratched her head, looking between me and the roses, before she sank into the seat. "I didn't—"

"Mrs. Park probably delivered them here." I sat down opposite her, just... taking in the way she looked over a bouquet of roses, across the table from me, in the gentle, low lights of the restaurant.

"I didn't tell her about—"

"I mean, I mentioned it to like *one* person that you were getting me dinner here—just to say how sweet it was of you—and I guess word might have gotten around."

She looked out the window. "How many people did you actually tell?"

"Uh, nine."

She pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Oh, yeah. Anders, too. So ten."

"This was just that I wanted to make sure you eat—"

"Uh-huh. That's what I told all ten of them."

She sighed.

"Oh, I forgot I mentioned it to Connor too. Eleven."

She gave me a tired smile. "You haven't changed a bit."

I looked out the window. "I changed a lot. We've been going over this."

She laughed drily. “I guess so. I mean... you’re certainly a lot more upfront with your feelings now than you were. You...” She looked down. “You wouldn’t... tell me so readily that you...”

“That I love you.”

She raked her fingers back through her hair again.

“Nothing makes things clearer than losing something. You don’t realize what you’ve got till it’s gone. And, um...” I shifted, fussing with my menu, and my voice came out smaller. “And I like having you. A lot. I’m a little afraid of being in love, if I’m being totally honest, but if I only have so many opportunities to say it to your face, I’m going to climb onto every rooftop and scream it out to the heavens. Let everyone in Bayview know that I love you.”

She pursed her lips, looking down at her menu, just settling into the quiet, before she spoke in a small, distant whisper. “From you, that sounds like a credible threat.”

I winked. “A credible promise.”

“And... how many people have you already told?”

“Um...” I folded my hands, looking away. “Gee, that’s a question. Define told. Does it count if somebody talks about how I’m in love with you and I don’t question it?”

“I’m going to say yes.”

“Emberlynn, of course. She’s my ride-or-die. Aria, I guess. I mean, she’s my sister, sadly. Priscilla, because there’s no way I’d hide anything from her anyway. Kay already knew a while ago, so Gwen knew for sure, and since Gwen knows, Charlie knows. I told Annabel, because—you know, commiserating over having been sad about the same girl. Sam, because I figured he would forget about it anyway, but he didn’t, and then he told Jenna, too. Oliver kept bugging me about it, so him too, so his maybe-maybe-not boyfriend too, obviously. Hazel—”

“Who *doesn’t* know?”

I laughed awkwardly. “I’m going to go out on a limb and say no one.”

She pursed her lips. I shifted.

“If you’re mad at me over that, I’m gonna need you to say it upfront.”

“Just...” She hugged herself, looking down. “Why... me?”

I fussed with my hair, a nervous energy bouncing around in my chest. “I mean, why me? You, um... however you feel about me now, you cared about me before, didn’t you?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.” She scratched the back of her head, turning back to the window—looking anywhere and everywhere except at me.

“Love is just like that, isn’t it? All I know is that you make me happy, and, um... and I like the person I am when I’m with you. And I like the things that we do together. And I like everything about you. That’s the only thing that matters, right?”

“Bold words, as the one who never stopped complaining about how I’m the worst—”

“Please. You know that’s how I say I love you.”

She was quiet until the waiter came around, and she placed her order picking something at random off the menu in a low voice, still not quite lifting her gaze above the table. Once the waiter left, bringing us back to the tense, nervous silence that hung over us, Harper looked away with a tired sigh.

“I guess it is,” she said, her voice low. “The only thing that matters.”

“Even the things that drive me up the wall a little bit. They’re a part of who you are. And I like you—in all of who you are.”

“But we change. You change. I change. What if—” She stopped, pursing her lips, taking a long breath, and she let it out slowly and shakily through her nose. “What if we’re all...

different people... from who we were ten years ago? Five years ago? Sometimes you're a different person from who you were... yesterday. Sometimes when something happens..."

I folded my hands on the table. "Then maybe you don't love each other in the same way anymore. Maybe you've been married for twenty years and something happens and it changes everything, and you don't love each other anymore, and you go your separate ways. But I don't think that means those twenty years went to waste. You don't need to, like... chart out a course for your life and figure it out beforehand and then stick to it."

She shifted, a hundred different emotions warring on her face. I decided to go for it.

"Not even if you're doing it for someone else's sake."

She tightened her expression, giving me that sharp, pained look where I wanted to take everything back and make it all better, but—but I needed to say this. She needed to hear it. And what did I have to lose? If I didn't put it all on the line now, I'd never see her again.

She swallowed, shakily, before she said, "It's one thing to say it in theory..."

"Would you want someone else to do that for you?"

She winced. The silence settled heavy over us again, but I didn't back down—sat there in the quiet and turned my gaze out to where rain droplets started to splash across the broad leaves of the dark plants, and I let the silence brew until Harper spoke, just a breath.

"I... it... it should have been me, though." She closed her eyes, squeezing her hands on the tabletop. "That's the problem. It was... it was supposed to be me."

"And you think she'd have said the same thing?" I said, and she snorted, her voice thick.

"Probably. The situation was pretty cut and dry."

I paused. "Harper... what happened?"

She pinched the bridge of her nose, turning back to the window. “I don’t want to—”

“You can trust me. It’s always been you and me.”

She sucked in a long, sharp breath, letting it out slowly, shakily, before she nodded, once. “It—it has. Somehow or other, I guess so. Just... I don’t... are you sure you *want* to? You might hate me for it.”

I didn’t think anything in the world could make me hate her. “I want to hear it.”

She pursed her lips, squeezing her eyes shut, and she held there, pulled taut, for a long time before she managed words. “Okay. I’ll give you the short version. She was sick. Chronic... condition. Needed medication on standby. But something went wrong with her backup. Don’t ask what. I don’t remember. It doesn’t matter. She—” She raked her fingers over her face, her voice getting thicker. “It was just the two of us when she had an episode. Mother didn’t look after us very much—wasn’t really with it. No one else in the picture. We had to go out to the specialist to get her emergency medicine, and I... I didn’t go. Said I wasn’t going out running in the rain and that she seemed fine to drive. I just didn’t want to. That’s all it fucking was. Just couldn’t be fucking bothered —”

“Harper.” I put a hand on hers, reaching across the table and stilling her. She tensed, looking at me like a cornered animal, and I smiled, softly. “Breathe, okay?”

She sucked in a sharp breath, letting it out shakily, and then a second one, slower. She closed her eyes, continuing in a slower, quieter voice. “Our mother forgot I existed half the time. Like I said, she wasn’t... with it, and she was focused on keeping... my sister alive. So I resented her. And genuinely, it didn’t seem like it was that severe an episode, so I just... just told her to go... go take care of it herself.”

“And she didn’t make it back,” I said, softly. She shook her head.

“It got worse as it went untreated. What do you know? Almost like that’s how it fucking works and that’s what happens every time. Ended up in a car accident and before the paramedics could make it, she just... she...” She shrugged, looking out the window, trying to look unbothered. “Guess I just figured if one of us should have died out on those roads, it should have been me. But here I am.”

“I’m really sorry for your loss.”

“Don’t be. It’s my fault.”

I frowned. “You were a kid. Sounded like you were taking care of your sister more than your mom was. It’s not like you were the only one with any responsibility.”

She shrugged, going for casual, offhand. She didn’t quite make it. I’d never seen the poor girl like this before—this haunted look on her face said she hadn’t faced these particular ghosts probably ever since it happened. “Hiding from my responsibility already killed one person. I’m not doing it again. I let her die because I didn’t feel like going out in the rain. How’s that for something to like about me?”

“You could have gone and not made it in time. You were just a kid and it wasn’t even your medicine and you weren’t even supposed to be getting another prescription pickup, so maybe you wouldn’t have even been able to get the right medicine or the right dosage. You should have been able to call an ambulance or at least count on your mother, and without that, you had a situation with no right answer. You could have tried to save her until you were blue in the face and ___”

“And at least then I’d go on knowing I *tried*. It’s just... I wish...” She looked down, squeezing her eyes shut. “I wish I had. Tried. Something. Anything.”

I paused. “Out of curiosity, how many times did you already have to take part in taking care of her and keeping her well before this?”

She turned to the window, shrugging.

“I’m going to imagine that means it was a lot. You were just a kid. You’d make a mistake eventually.”

“You’re awfully stubborn,” she sighed, rubbing her temple. “I let an innocent girl die. You were supposed to...”

“Hate you?”

She didn’t say anything. I sat up straighter as the waiter’s footsteps came back from behind me, stepping around the corner and setting down our food. I chatted enough for the both of us—he’d attended the First International Paisley Foosball Tournament I’d put on last month, which was a relief *somebody* came because for being an international tournament it sure only had one small town participating—and I got to chatter and ask him about his DJing career he was still trying to get to take off.

More importantly, Harper needed a break. And she looked like the memory of it was needling at her brain a little less once the waiter left, our food set down in front of us, a tall Sapporo beer for each of us. Harper’s favorite. Because she deserved that.

“I’m so sorry that happened to you,” I said, and she sighed.

“I shouldn’t have dumped all of that... please don’t tell anybody.”

“Of course I won’t. But I’m glad you told me. And...”

And what? What was I supposed to say? Tell her that no amount of running herself ragged trying to do more, more, *more* was ever going to bring Lindsay back? That she didn’t owe the universe a blood debt she had to pay back by working herself to death? That she still deserved to be loved even with her bruised parts?

Of course I could have said all of that. But what difference would it have made just saying that?

Besides, it wasn’t very Paisley. And being with Harper made me realize I kind of liked Paisley as I was her—a lot.

“And by the way, now that I have you trapped with some food, do you want me to tell you what the letter was?” I said lightly. “Because it’s actually addressed to you. Annabel just told me to find a time to read it for you when you can’t run away.”

“Son of a—” She raked her fingers back through her hair. “Oh, that’s just like her. Just like you, too.”

“I’m going to take that as a compliment, because I want you to compliment me. In case that wasn’t already established.”

“I think it may have been...” She sighed, dropping her arms by her sides. “I never was able to win against you, Pais. Fine. Let’s hear it.”

Chapter 27

Harper

Annabel had always been able to run circles around me. Seemed the more Bayview changed, the more it stayed the same.

Even without me there.

Paisley pulled the letter out from her bra—because really, where else would she keep a letter—and unfolded the paper, looking up at me from across the table with that soft warmth in her eyes.

She was getting some color back. Here in the low glow of the restaurant lights, by the ambiance of the rain streaking over the window and pattering on the garden, looking up at me over the roses that *of course* Mrs. Park would surprise us with—she looked as if nothing had ever happened. As if she'd never worked herself straight into the hospital. As if I'd never left.

And wasn't that a happy dream?

Hell, she'd even jumped out a second-story window and climbed a fence. In a dress. She was clearly feeling better.

Hadn't that been my signal to go back to New York?

"Hi, Harper," Paisley said, her eyes going between me and the letter as she read. "*I'm going to be honest, it's a little surreal that you're here. It feels like you've been gone a lifetime. Annabel's handwriting sucks.*"

"Always has," I said, picking at my food. It wasn't like it wasn't appetizing—Hinomoto did good food—but maybe I'd just also been losing my appetite recently. The past six months, maybe.

"*I know we've got a little bit of complicated history, but I've loved all of the things we've been together, and your friendship... she misspelled friendship.*"

“Didn’t she do well in school?”

“She forgot the *n*, so it’s a fried ship instead. I’m going to guess she’s just distracted thinking about girls.”

“Yeah, I’d believe it...”

She cleared her throat. *“I know friendships end, and sometimes it’s for the better. Talking with Priscilla lately about her traveling really drives home how sometimes, if you love someone, you really have to let them go.”*

“I know how much this journey has meant for you. All this time I’ve known you, you’ve been singularly focused on this one thing, this one path, in a way where nothing can stop you.”

“I think that’s what I liked about you the most. But seeing Priscilla come into her own in a way that feels right to her makes it clear how yours is different.”

“I don’t think you’re doing any of this for yourself. I think you’re trying to run from something. And if you run from yourself, it’s always going to find you.”

“I’d support you taking your career to the next level in New York if it was what you wanted. But you and I know it’s not what you want. Priscilla knows it, too.”

Paisley frowned. I raised an eyebrow, and she looked away.

“Next part mentions me.”

“Ah.” Because of course it did.

“And so does Paisley.”

I let out a long breath, just watching rain slide in long streaks down the window. Quietly, Paisley continued.

“There’s a lot of people here who really like you. As you actually are, not as the version of you that you feel like you’re supposed to perform.”

“I guess you probably have a rule that drives this thing you’re doing. Some kind of sacred code. You always did seem to follow some other set of rules only you could see.”

“I’m just saying, sometimes you need to check in and make sure those rules are worth living by. Because there are a lot of rules that deserve to be broken.”

“Do it not just for us, for me and Scil and Emberlynn and all the others, not just for Paisley, but for yourself. No matter who you love, the person it comes back to the most at the end of every day is you. Scil’s really helped me see that life is a journey to love yourself, in all that you really are. Think I owe it to her at least to pass that one on from her to you.”

Paisley leaned back in her seat, halfway folding the letter back.

“And then down at the bottom,” she said, “there’s a note. Besides, I’m going to hunt you to the ends of the earth to bake a cake for Scil’s graduation party. You make the best cakes, and she deserves it. Don’t let me down. And then, love, Annabel.” She wrinkled her nose. “Ugh. Love. Hands off my girl.”

Paisley had said things like that so many times... surprise really that I didn’t already know she was in love with me. Seemed Aria had been right about her after all.

I rubbed my temple, a nervous feeling tossing and turning in my chest. So many things I couldn’t name, but the one thing I could name was that Paisley looked so beautiful like this—although thinking back, I wasn’t sure there was ever a time she *wasn’t* beautiful—and I—

“Well, anyway, she’s right,” Paisley said, putting the letter away in her bag, which would have been a more sensible place than her bra to begin with. “You can’t run away from your problems and hide behind a mountain of work to avoid facing your own identity crisis.”

I shot her a look. “I’m sorry. Who is this right now who’s saying that?”

“Oh, well.” She scratched her head. “It’s different when it’s me.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I *know* it hasn’t been healthy and happy and... and... right. But what else even could I do? Chase you down to New York and ask you to come back with me?” She looked away. “That’s clearly Emberlynn’s thing. And besides, you’d... you’d...” She shrugged helplessly, looking smaller and smaller. “You’d just refuse anyway. And then that would be a really sad flight home.”

I pursed my lips, looking down at my food.

Never thought me disappearing would hurt people. After all, I was just... just a ghost. And who missed a ghost?

“You don’t even know where I live in New York,” I opted for saying, sipping at my beer just for something to occupy my hands. Paisley smiled.

“Paisley has her ways.”

“Because that’s not terrifying.”

Paisley shook her head, smiling. “Okay, I’m going to come out and say it. This oppressive atmosphere is putting me in the ring. Let me tell you about the gossip you missed.”

Putting her... through the wringer. Right. I relaxed in the seat, feeling the knots unwinding in my chest. “Hit me.”

“God, I don’t know where to start.”

“My business block? Since it’s been your business block these past six months.”

Her eyes flared up. “Oh, let me tell you about *Fong*. Because this is more than just her singing. Her? Matthew? Fucking like animals.”

“What? Matthew T?”

“The one and only.”

“*Fong*? Does she not have *eyes*? And... taste?”

“My questions exactly. I’m tempted to knock on the door one of these nights when I hear him grunting like an ox in labor and ask if she couldn’t find anyone better.”

I made a face. “What about Rich? Has he stopped pining for her?”

She rolled her eyes. “Rich has his head in the sand so far he’s snorting buried treasure. He’s the only one in Bayview who doesn’t know Fong and Matthew are having ugly-loud sex every night, simply because he refuses to acknowledge it. Said Matthew T just does deadlifting.”

“*Deadlifting?* In the middle of the night? At Fong’s house?” I shook my head. “From the one who gets dinner delivered to his house from two blocks down? He can’t be bothered to walk that far, but he’s doing nightly deadlifting on the other end of town?”

“Like I said, Rich is so far buried in the sand that even the most sophisticated seismological instruments can’t detect his ass. But while we’re on the subject of food delivery, guess who delivered my cheese from Hogshead last time?”

“Delivered—Paisley, you have two homes that are both adjacent to Hogshead.”

“Sh—shush. I was doing a thing with Emberlynn and Annabel down at the boardwalk. And I wanted a cheese board, so—look, forget that. Millie Cooke ring any bells?”

“She’s back in town?”

“Apparently!” She threw her hands up, whacking the table in the process and nearly spilling her beer. She lurched in, grabbing it and keeping it from tipping over, only looking the littlest bit chagrined. “Okay, maybe Millie Cooke back in town isn’t worth flipping the table over. But it almost is! After she ran off all uppity, coming back, tailing between her legs!”

I lost track of time like that, hearing every last bit of tiny gossip, and somewhere along the way I found the appetite to dig into my meal—somewhere along the way the food dwindled down to nothing, and somewhere along the way, we got the check, and somewhere along the way, I paid, telling Paisley I just had a high-paying job now even though what was really in my mind was *you paid on the last date*. And when we stepped outside, Paisley didn’t have her umbrella

with her—in what universe would she have her umbrella, really—so I opened mine and held it for both of us against where the rain had settled to a steady trickle.

I'd missed hearing the sound of her voice, even if I'd been sick of it at one in the morning on my roof some nights. I'd missed the wild, unrestrained way she laughed, big belly laughs with snorts and all.

I guess I'd missed her.

The walk back to the bakery was too short by far—I wasn't ready to face reality yet—and I paused at the door, but Paisley didn't. She shoved the door open, grabbing me by the hand, and she pulled me in after her, and I had to fumble to get the umbrella closed before I tracked water all over the floor.

“See how much easier it is when you don't keep the door locked for no reason?” she said.

“Indeed,” I said drily. “Why even have a door? Just leave an empty doorway.”

“Hey. Don't say that like I wouldn't.” She nodded me towards the stairs. “C'mon, you're not losing me that easily. I could get weak and pass out again.”

She seemed fine. But I wasn't going to tell her that.

I followed her upstairs into my old home, still strange and nostalgic with the way she'd left everything right where it was, and we kicked off our shoes and stripped out of our jackets. I'd been in the middle of hanging up my jacket by the door when Paisley hit me from behind, thudding into me and wrapping her arms around me. I softened back into her, trying to pretend it wasn't breaking me feeling her this close to me, touching me, holding me.

“What, needed something to hold onto or you'd fall over?”

She snorted, burying her face between my shoulder blades. “No, you clown. I love you and I wanted to hold you.”

I really couldn't handle much more of this. She'd break me before long, talking like that. I looked out the window.

“Plenty of other people out there you could hold.”

“Don’t be difficult. I said I love *you*, not that I love holding people.” She took my hand, turning me around to face her, and here in the low lights of the living room with the overhead light turned off, just lit by the soft glow of the table lamp behind Paisley and the moonlight coming in through the window, she looked so... enchanting. The way her eyes sparkled, the soft shape of her lips—suddenly she was the only thing that had ever existed.

It had always been me and her. Ever since the day she first moved into Bayview and I’d found her in the back, shopping for cakes among the unfinished ones there. Apparently she’d mistaken the back door for the entrance and had just thought that was what the bakery looked like.

For how much this girl had changed, she’d never really changed at all.

Paisley cocked her head, smiling. “What are you thinking about?”

“Hm. Wondering what witch cursed you so you could never enter a building through its front door.”

“Um, a witch called *practicality*, I guess. I use whatever entrance is closest. Don’t blame me if I’m smarter than the system.” She flicked her hair back.

“Pretty sure your entire identity is wrapped up in not being smarter than anything.”

She grinned. “There’s lots of kinds of intelligence. For example, I have excellent taste in cheese. Did you know Kay just eats gouda? Like, on everything? Is that disgusting, or what?”

“Appalling.”

“Tell me about it. I even chewed her out about it, saying if she wants a strong flavor she should at least *try* a gorgonzola or even just a mature cheddar, but what does she say? *No, I like this one.*”

“Surprised you’re still friends after a dealbreaker like that.”

“Let it be said that Paisley is ever the magnanimous one.”

I kissed her. It wasn’t really that I decided to do it—I just decided to stop *not* doing it, like this was the natural order of things and I stopped holding my foot in the door, stopped holding the system up, and let my lips find hers. Paisley let out a surprised noise, muffled against my lips, but she sank into me, slipping her hands to my back and grabbing my shirt, bunching it up in her hands, and she tilted her head back to meet me better, kissing me as the headlights of a passing car flared over the night-lit room. I closed my eyes, let everything else disappear, and I kissed Paisley, and we were Harper and Paisley, and it was right.

Paisley parted from the kiss with her eyes shimmering, and she smiled impossibly at me. “Are you that into cheese?”

“Honestly, Paisley? I really couldn’t care less what kind of cheese Kay prefers.”

She laughed, tangling her fingers in my hair. “Uncouth animals all around me...”

She kissed me again, and I never wanted anything but this—never wanted to be anywhere but here.

We made our way to the bedroom, tripping over each other’s feet barely parting from each other’s lips the whole way, and Paisley giggled wildly when she bumped into the bedroom door and nearly fell over. She interlaced her fingers with mine once we got into the bedroom, tugging me after her as she fell backwards onto the foot of the bed, looking up at me with those hazel eyes dark, staring up through her eyelashes.

“Harper,” she said, her voice soft, sweet, warm, everything I needed. “You’ll stay here tonight, right...?”

It wasn’t hard to figure out what she was referring to. And maybe I should have said no, but I ached for her in every way—I’d missed her, so much more than I could put into

words, and I hadn't even let myself acknowledge that until now.

I sank onto the bed with her, cupping a hand over her cheek, just taking in the way she looked in the moonlight like this. "Are you... sure you're feeling okay tonight?" I said, and she smiled wider.

"Maybe I'm not. That would mean you have to stay here with me and make sure I'm okay, right?"

I looked away. "Paisley, I know what you're getting at right now."

"I haven't felt sick or tired for one second today," she said, slipping a hand down to my waist, just holding onto me. "I mean, I got what I really needed, so..."

I swallowed, dropping my gaze, suddenly shy. Paisley moved in and kissed tenderly at my jawline, lingering there, and then kissing an inch lower, prickling the sensitive skin on my neck as she kissed down. I arched into her, letting out a soft breath of need, and she moved with me and captured my lips against hers, a hot kiss that lingered against me as she lowered me onto my back.

"Spend the night," she whispered against my lips.

"I mean, ostensibly this is where I'm staying anyway..."

"Spend it with me." She whispered words in between kisses, impossibly sweet, just little pecks against my lips, over and over. She was hypnotic—the sensation of her on me, her soft voice wrapping me up in her—and I found I couldn't resist.

"I will," I murmured. She shifted closer to my side, kissing me, endless little kisses peppered over my face.

"Good," she whispered, caressing a hand over my cheek, down to my collar. "I've missed this..."

"Me too." The words slipped out without me even thinking about it. Paisley ducked down, kissing the base of my neck, sending a pleasant shudder down my spine.

"I want you," she breathed. "I want to love you."

I couldn't think of anything else—Paisley's soft touch, her fingertips roaming along me, skating over my skin, across my clothes, I wanted to give everything to her. I nodded breathlessly, slipping a hand to her back, and she met me immediately, shifting one leg over me and straddling me. I arched against her and let it happen, let everything happen—her lips on my collar, on my neck, nipping lightly at my lips. Her fingers undoing the buttons of my shirt. Delicate hands pulling my shirt open ever so softly, slipping it down my arms and pulling it out from under me. I trailed my hands over her, my mind filled with the numbing pleasure of Paisley all over me, feeling her gentle hourglass shape under her dress, caressing down to the soft skin of her thighs.

I loved her. Right now, that was all that existed.

“Take this off,” she whispered, moving my hand to the hem of her dress. The way she spoke in that voice, soft but direct, gentle but forceful, hummed as pleasure in my mind, and I obeyed with a whisper of acknowledgement, pulling down the hidden zipper on the side and pulling her dress up over her head. The soft musculature of her body sheened slightly with the first beading of sweat as I glided my fingers reverently over her, and she nodded me on with the kind of sweet, hazy smile that made me want to do anything for her.

She pressed her lips against mine again as she unhooked my bra, slipped it off my arms, and I whispered her name reverently as she kissed down along my breasts, unfastening my belt and undoing my pants as she did. She looked up at me as she kissed gently at my nipple, her perfect eyes warm looking up at me through her lashes, and I couldn't help the aching feelings telling me *just do this forever*. Forever, with Paisley. Wouldn't that be nice...

“You're so beautiful,” she whispered, hooking her fingers under the band of my underwear, sending electricity arcing through me. “I love seeing you...”

“You... you too.” I lifted my hips for her to take my underwear off, but she took her time, dragging them down slowly. I was aching for her, body pleading for her, and I heard myself gasping her name as she trailed her fingertips lightly up

my legs, grazing up my thighs, smiling sweetly at me, perfectly.

“You do the same for me, now,” she whispered, taking my hands and moving them to her bra. I obliged instantly, unhooking her bra and pulling it off her, dropping it off the edge of the bed, and her underwear next, pulling it down and taking a second with my breath hitching just admiring how utterly perfect she was, how beautiful every inch of her...

She sank against me, draping her body over mine and pressing her lips to mine, and I melted into the sensation—running my hands over every bit of her, feeling her perfect, smooth skin, soft to the touch, and feeling need building aching in my chest, my core, everywhere all at once. Wanting her. Needing her. Knowing there was nothing I wouldn't have done if she'd only ask—

Her hand slipped down between my legs, and I broke off from the kiss, crying out against her lips as she danced her fingers lightly over my center, teasing side-to-side over my folds—pressing with just enough force to part them, but not nearly as much as I needed. Her soft fingers moving against the coarse, short hairs there, raw and real.

“I'm going to make love to you now,” she whispered, moving one finger up to my clitoris and flicking the barest touch of her fingertip against it, pleasure throbbing against me like a drumbeat when she did.

“P-please.”

“You're going to show me how much you love it, too,” she whispered, taking my hand and moving it between her thighs. I shifted to meet her, slipping two fingers through her folds, feeling the intense, blazing heat of her there, fingers gliding along her wetness on soft skin. She bent back down to meet me, pressing her lips to mine, and she moved slow and languid with my lips, my tongue, as her hand roamed gentle on my shape, mine on hers.

She pulled away before long, up to straddle me again, her face flushed and lips glistening in the low light, and she bit her lip, smiling.

“Spread your legs wider for me. Let me see how much you love it.”

My body moved for me, aching for her. Paisley licked her two fingers and ran them up my center, teasing over my clit, and I whimpered in desperate need, wanting so much more that it hurt—

She moved her fingers down between her own legs, stroking softly through her folds, dipping the tip of one inside her, and she shifted and slipped them up to my mouth—I parted my lips for her, feeling her fingertips hot with her and my wetness mixed pushing my lips open, and I locked eyes with hers while I tasted her—us—swirling my tongue around her fingers.

She bit her lip, pulling her fingers back from my mouth, and she took my leg, hiking it up and positioning it between hers. “Stay just like that and let me do what I want with you,” she breathed, easing her center against mine, the blazing heat of her flooding me with pleasure. “I’m going to give you all my love, and you’re going to take every little bit of it, aren’t you?”

“Yes—of course.”

“That’s a good girl,” she breathed, and I closed my eyes, moaning and arching into her as she shifted her hips against mine. “Ah—don’t look away. Keep looking at me, sweetheart.”

I bit my lip, opening my eyes again and nodding, and I held her gaze as she started up a rhythm moving against me—the wetness running and pooling between us, heat building up to exploding, and I just let the sensation of it flood me—the way I loved her so much it felt like everything fell into place when I was with her, when we were like this. The realization that the only thing I ever wanted was this—was her—was us, forever.

I felt it build up until I thought I’d scream, pleasure beating against my walls until my whole body was ready to come apart, and she gripped tighter at me and gasped how she

was close, resting her head against my leg as her hips rocked faster, harder. “I’m going to... going to come on you...”

“Please,” I gasped, gripping at her and moving my hips with her, desperate for release, for anything—and it arrived with an all-consuming sensation that poured into my body and filled up every inch of me as I cried out her name, and she cried out mine, and we moved in this perfect dance of ecstasy until the lights all faded, just the soft glow of the stars dancing in the gentle blonde of Paisley’s hair as it spilled down her bare chest, sheening with sweat, and she collapsed next to me, kissing my shoulder, my collar.

I never wanted this to end. Never wanted to leave again...

“I love you,” she whispered. I caressed a hand over her cheek, feeling a laugh coming up from somewhere.

“I love you too,” I breathed. “But seriously—you’re up there moving around like that as if you weren’t in the hospital yesterday—”

“Yesterday was so long ago. Today is here now, and I like today.” She kissed me, softly, sweetly, on the lips, closing her eyes and resting against my side. “I love you so much...”

“You too.” It was a surreal moment, a dreamscape, and... and even though the words just floated out without me trying to say it, I couldn’t even regret it.

“Mm. I love you.”

“Getting your mileage out of those three little words, huh?”

“You can’t control me. I’ll say all the little words I want.”

“Uh-huh. I won’t crush your dreams, Paisley.”

“My dreams are impervious to crushing.”

She wasn’t wrong. I turned and held her softly against my chest, just feeling the way we breathed together, the way we moved together, the way we were everything together.

It was a dream. A beautiful, perfect dream.

But every dream ended somewhere. And once we'd cleaned ourselves up and Paisley had helped herself to cheese and grapes from the fridge, and I'd laughed at the Winnie-the-Pooh sight of her wearing only a t-shirt and eating from the fridge—once we nestled in one another's arms at the window watching the stars over Bayview, feeling her hair tickle my lips, we landed in bed together, Paisley breathing softly on my arm as she fell asleep straightaway.

The girl needed her sleep. She'd been through a lot.

I just hoped she could be happy.

I pressed a kiss to her forehead, slipping carefully out from under her, and I took a while just looking at her—taking her in, committing her to memory.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I love you, too."

Chapter 28

Paisley

Cold day today. Even with the windows shut, it was an older building, and the cold seeped in from where the skies were gray and the trees were well through losing their leaves. Moody cloud cover had been threatening rain all day, but I'd been up in the bakery since four this morning and it had never made good on its promise. Just making me expect something and then not following through.

I shot off a text to Oliver, helping him coordinate the new endcap display at the bookstore, and I looked up to where Anders was picking out his mini-cupcake from the rack. I pushed the phone away, stepping up to the register, and I put on a smile.

“Morning,” I said, ringing him up before he even got to the register. He had a heavy expression on his face.

“Morning, Paisley.” I didn't have to tell him the price—he handed over a crisp dollar and two quarters, and I put it in the drawer.

“How's Nancy?”

He sighed. “Not feeling too well lately.”

“Oh.” I pursed my lips. “Something happen?”

He shrugged helplessly. “We're old, Paisley. We don't need a reason to suddenly feel badly. And it's a bit scarier when it's us curmudgeonly old folks it's happening to.”

It wasn't like Anders and Nancy hadn't had the occasional health issue since I'd gotten here—nothing that a little bit of extra rest couldn't fix, some regular checkups, the occasional house call, me or Emberlynn bringing over dinner and spending time with them, and sometimes Nancy coming in to pick up her own cupcake instead—but his expression wasn't usually this serious. I focused on boxing up his cupcake.

He really needed to just get a reusable container. He could probably have built a castle out of the used ones by now.

“I hope she’ll be okay,” I said. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do, okay?”

He shook his head, taking the box. “Don’t you worry yourself about it, Paisley. You stress yourself enough these days. It’s bad for your own health, you know. You’ll land in the hospital again.”

Well, maybe if I did, then Harper would come back again. Maybe if I worked a little harder, went a little further, broke myself a little more, she’d come back again. Come break my heart again.

“Okay,” I said. “Let me know if there’s anything I can send Emberlynn to do, then.”

That got a little laugh out of him, smiling softly as he stepped away from the counter. “You know, it’s good to see Bayview has youth like you in it. You and Emberlynn, Aria, Annabel, everyone.”

One less person than I wanted it to have. But I wasn’t saying that. Speaking aloud about her was taboo these last few weeks since she’d disappeared again with only a letter left behind, as if saying anything about her might summon back the dull, aching pain I’d had after I’d woken up alone and wandered like an abandoned child through the house calling her name.

Was the sex that bad? Ugh.

“See if Nancy says the same thing,” I said, putting on a smile. “I’ll bet she has some complaints about us youth.”

“Ah, c’mon. You know she loves you, no matter how much she complains.” He held up the box in a wave. “See you tomorrow, Paisley.”

“See you tomorrow.” I was back to the text with Oliver as soon as he was out the door, checking over the pictures he sent, and I typed up suggestions for it while I headed out onto the floor and tidied up the shelves. Rung up Krystal for her cinnamon chip muffins and headed into the back to finish up

the next round of baking, rotating racks in and out of the ovens, getting the fresh pies out to cool, getting the cookies out into their clamshells for the floor. Just carrying on through the little gestures, the little motions, all just for something to focus on, and when I got back to the floor, I scowled at the sight of Emberlynn there at the counter with a multigrain loaf.

She was in late. I hated knowing what that meant.

“Sorry, we’re closed to huge losers,” I said, walking past her and getting the huge stack of cookie clamshells onto the shelves.

“I just saw Millie Cooke walk out of here this morning with arms loaded, and I know how you feel about her.”

“Yeah, she was unbearable. Just the worst. I decided to enact the policy in the wake of her being in here.”

“You know, just because she beats you at card games...”

I finished getting the last of the cookies on the shelf, walking back around to ring up Emberlynn’s order. “Enough talk of her. Makes me gag. Ugh. Well, I didn’t put up the no-losers sign in the window yet, so I guess you get in on a technicality. What’re you doing for dinner?”

“That pumpkin sage soup you love. Aria leaked the family recipe to me, and I’m feeding you tonight.”

I sighed. I didn’t like being read as so miserable that I couldn’t cook for myself, or the way Emberlynn had fussed over me eating ever since I got hospitalized. “I can feed myself.”

She shoved a hand in her pocket, looking away. “Do you know how much it worries me when *you* refuse free food?”

“I’m not refusing free food, I’m going to eat it. I’m objecting to being patronized.”

“We cook for each other all the time. You’re just touchy about it now.”

“Yeah, well, nyeh-nyeh. Just the bread?”

“Just the bread.”

I bagged the bread, taking her card and ringing her up. “Hear back from your label manager friend yet? What was his name, Edgar?”

“Uh. Do you mean Julie?”

“Yeah, her. You hear back yet?”

She looked away. “Yeah, considering me for the next album... last one went well, but she likes Philip, so after how much he shit-talked me last time, it’s kind of up in the air.”

“This label is nothing but trouble.”

“Yeah, tell me about it. Makes me wonder why I get caught up in this stuff.”

An awkward silence settled over both of us. I tore her receipt once it finished printing, tossed it in the trash can, and I handed the bag over without a word. She took it, without a word.

When someone pushed out through the door behind her, she jolted back to the present and put on a thin smile.

“I’m okay, though. Really. I conquered my demons getting things done with them after all, and I don’t really care if they don’t want me back.”

“Sounds like sour grapes to me, but what does little old Paisley know?”

“How to stick her nose into everything.”

I felt a smile come on. “Too true. Any update on your family?”

“Yup. Mom’s arriving on the Monday before Thanksgiving, and what’s more, my sister’s apparently getting that whole week off, so she’s coming by too. Hallelujah.”

“Hey. Promise is still on to hang out at your place and scare them into behaving.”

Even if that promise felt like it was another lifetime. Back at the festival, where I’d attended alongside Harper...

I couldn't think about her right now. But I stopped myself too late, because Emberlynn caught that look I must have had in my eyes. She softened.

"Are you okay?" she said, voice low. I looked away.

"I'm good. I've got work to do."

"Aria and I worry about you. A lot."

"Ew, gag."

She reached over the counter and squeezed my arm. Blessedly, she didn't pursue the subject any further. "I know you're pulling a double shift with the bookstore, so we'll have dinner later tonight. Come by at eight."

What a sap. I tried to smile. "Trust me, I'm tempted to call off the entire shift, close the bookstore down altogether if it means I get soup."

It was a transparent lie, but Emby pretended she believed it, which was pretty cool of her. She left with her bread in tow, and I went back through the motions, one step after another, just... living.

I wondered how long it was going to hurt like this. Did Harper coming back restart the clock and I'd lost those six months' progress in healing?

And what if I didn't want to heal?

I finished up at the bakery, closing the store, spent the next forty-five minutes cleaning up and preparing for next morning's open. Went upstairs, took a shower, got changed, and I headed down the short walk to the bookstore, down the steps and into the plaza where I pushed in through the old door that jingled overhead and waved to Oliver behind the counter, ringing up a line of orders. Did the inventory count while he cleared out his line, and I took over the front, letting him go.

"Have fun with your kayaking," I said, and he stopped, looking back over the register.

"Thanks, Pais. That's next week, though."

Right. Time was all the same to me. “Okay, have fun with sitting at home alone or whatever you do, now scoot.”

I was halfway through a numbingly quiet shift—everybody was waiting for Black Friday sales at the end of the month, so most of my shift I had nothing to do but stand there and think, which was my least favorite part of every day. I was in the middle of tidying up the same display I’d already tidied twice this hour when the doorbell jingled, and I looked at where Kay came in with a cup of bubble tea. Matcha. What was once my favorite flavor was now as appetizing as dishwater.

“Hi, Pais,” she said.

“You’re coming to a bookstore? You mean you can read?”

She put a hand on her hip. “Is that any way to treat paying customers? I’m going to leave a scathing review of this place.”

“Looking for something?”

She beamed. “Yeah. You. Um... there was extra... matcha that was cleared to go at the end of today, so I whipped you up your favorite drink and brought it here. Just figured it was better than throwing it out.”

“When was the last time your matcha ran to the end of its shelf-life?”

She shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. “Um, it happens sometimes...”

“Who told you to bring me a drink?”

“Nobody!”

I crossed my arms. She cracked.

“Okay, you can’t tell anyone I told you, but it was Emberlynn.”

How on earth did I know? I sighed. “I already ate a pastry this morning, so I don’t think I have room.”

She scrunched up her face. “It’s not just Emberlynn who’s worried about you. It’s all of us ever since—”

“I’ve got stuff to get to,” I said, turning around.

“Paisley, wait,” she said, fumbling over herself after me. “We’re just worried because ever since Harper—”

I stopped at the door to the back, turning back to her with my face burning, a hotness in my throat I wasn’t used to. “I don’t know what makes you think I want to talk about her.”

Kay paused, hanging there in front of the endcap display, eyes wide. “I just don’t think—”

“I don’t want any tea. If you’re not here to shop, I’ve got work to do.”

She winced. “I’m sorry—”

“Bye then,” I said, turning back to the door, pushing into the back. A pile of paperwork that needed doing. I sat down at the cluttered desk in front of it, staring down at the papers for what might have been hours, before I heard Kay’s footsteps solemnly leaving.

Funny. It had been Kay telling me I was free to be something new, something different. Now I was being something new, and it was snapping at Kay for trying to bring me something I liked when I wasn’t feeling well.

Funny how the universe worked.

I scrolled through my phone, through all the pictures, just looking at her face. Just looking at *her*.

I should have deleted them. That was part of healing, right? Needed to round up the pictures and delete them, needed to cart out all her things and trash them. But right now, it felt tantamount to cutting off my own arm.

She was so perfectly beautiful. I just hated how in every picture, there was that look in her eyes, like she wasn’t really there. Like it wasn’t really her.

I wasn’t the only one putting things on. Wasn’t the only one pretending to be something I wasn’t. And I realized too

late.

The rest of the shift was excruciatingly long, but I handed it off to Hazel at seven—she'd only just started working here, so I was still just giving her half-shifts at closing, and I knew I looked awful when even Hazel barely spoke to me during the changeover—and I headed back up to my house. Got cleaned up, went over to Emberlynn's for dinner, spent the whole time listening to Emberlynn and Aria talk, stirring my soup idly.

I'd used to love this soup. Maybe Emberlynn screwed up and that's why it tasted like cardboard. I had to believe that.

I was early to bed after that. Woke up a quarter to four and dragged myself up despite everything in my body screaming for me to lie back down, curl up and rest. The pain, the exertion, was like a knife that cut through the haze in my head, and I needed all I could get.

The bakery. Early morning baking. Opening for the regular morning crew. Watching the sunrise through the tiny windows I had in the back, cracked to let in the biting cold against the sweltering heat of the bakery. Tidying the shopfloor after the first peak. Ringing up Emberlynn when she came in early for a baguette. Getting Gwen her rolls for a nice dinner tonight, ringing up a cake-for-two for Annabel saying Priscilla had been stressed out of her mind lately and needed a surprise, and Anders's mini-cupcake. Asking after Nancy—still not doing well today, seeing the doctor. Emberlynn passed me an invite to a casual get-together at her place, and the tone in her message said she already knew I'd refuse.

I said no.

Closed up, cleaned up. Took over at the bookstore. A little busier today, thankfully. Kept me working steadily until close, and I went right back home, picked together a couple of things from the fridge I could get myself to eat, and then to bed.

Was I dreaming? The whole thing felt surreal, like images imposed over one another. A hazy, empty day led into another, and it was only in uncomfortable stabs of lucidity

here and there that I saw myself. Kneading a bread dough by hand and stopping partway, looking up across the room at nothing. Cleaning the display case for the donuts after the afternoon rush had passed and stopping in the empty shop, looking at my faint reflection in the glass. Fixing books on a shelf in the bookstore that had been put back wrong, except I took one down and then questioned what the order was supposed to be and overthought it until I had no idea how it was supposed to work. Checking the register to make sure the count was right and getting the wrong number, doing it again and getting a different wrong number, doing it again and getting a different wrong number. Cleaning the bakery floor until I could see myself in the reflection. Scrubbing the counter and scrubbing the same spot over, and over, and over, and over, and...

The bell rang. Not the one on the door, but the one on the counter, while I was standing literally right there. I blinked. The bakery. I'd been in the middle of midday cleanup and zoned out. Priscilla stood on the other side of the counter, her finger hovering over the bell, giving me an inquisitive look.

"Oh, hi," I said. "I was thinking about stuff. What's up? Want a recommendation? I personally recommend the most expensive cake."

She smiled softly. "I'm here to take you to a party."

I blinked slowly. "This might blow your mind, but I'm, uh, I'm working."

"Trust me. It's been blowing my mind for months seeing you working so much."

I looked away. Priscilla was not who I needed right now. "I've got stuff to be doing."

"Mm-hm. It can wait."

"I'm in the middle of my shift."

"Not anymore, you're not. Did you not notice I turned the sign to closed, turned down the lights...?"

I scowled up at the ceiling. How badly *had* I zoned out?

Only for like... the past week. Or several. God, Emberlynn's family was visiting after the weekend, and I'd completely blanked.

"You can't just close my bakery," I said, and she smiled.

Ugh. I got what she was thinking. I scowled at her.

"Okay, look. *I* can close down the bakery when I know someone needs a break, but..."

She smiled. I groaned.

"Jeez, since when were you such a party fiend that you're going to shut everything down to get me there?"

She tucked her hair back behind her ear. "I'm pretty sure Emberlynn and Aria put it on just to get a chance to talk to you, so... they were also putting out the word that you were closing early today."

I got a sick feeling turning in my stomach. "I don't need people gathering around me to patronize me, pat me on the shoulder—"

"I know. You need something a lot bigger than that, don't you?"

I shot her a look. She smiled, softly, sweetly.

"It's okay to need what you need, Paisley. The whole purpose of changing how you come across to the world isn't to change your needs, it's to make it more likely you'll get those needs met."

I raked my fingers back through my hair. "Kay really chatted to the whole town about my insecurities, didn't she?"

She cleared her throat. "I mean, she tried to keep it a secret. But you know how it is... saying unprompted *Paisley isn't feeling any insecurities around how she fits into the world, so I don't know anything about why she's suddenly doing these kinds of things.*"

"Remind me never to tell her anything again." I sighed, leaning back against the wall behind the counter. Being forced out of my routine shook me out of the trance, and I wasn't sure

if I liked being out of it, but I was out of it now. “Is she at the party? I kind of owe her an apology...”

“She is. And I can promise you she doesn’t blame you.”

I looked out the window, watching the tree branches scrape on the glass. Priscilla followed my gaze, letting the silence steep before she spoke again.

“You’ve taken on quite the project, Paisley. It’s honestly impressive. So I wanted to ask if you... do you like the results?”

“Doesn’t matter.” The words tumbled out automatically.

She smiled. “You really are just like her, aren’t you?”

I scoffed. “We don’t talk about her.”

“Just think about her?”

“I’m done thinking about her.”

She didn’t say anything. I shifted, a heavy weight in my stomach, and I heard my voice come out smaller.

“I, um... I dunno. I’m kind of just on autopilot.”

“The same way you were before?”

“What? It’s nothing like that.” But I scrunched up my face, a nervous feeling turning in my stomach. Priscilla just smiled at me, and it was overwhelming before too long, and I looked away, back to the window. “This is the life that I designed.”

“So was the old one. And every day, in its own way. I think we’re all continually rediscovering ourselves. Isn’t that what life is? If you only wanted one static thing, one experience, read a book. Watch a movie. Isn’t the whole point of life this—to be able to change everything, do anything?”

I sighed. My head hurt.

“What’s the point of trading out one form of *living life for other people* for another?”

“I’m living life for me.”

“Are you? What do you want?”

“A custard tart.”

She gestured to the bakery. “They’re all around you. What do you want, Paisley? What’s—what’s that thing that makes your heart ache with want, that you can’t get enough of—what’s that thing you’re ashamed to tell other people how much you want because of *how much you want it*?”

“What do you think it is?” I snapped, not expecting the waver in my voice. I sank against the counter. “I... I want... to see Harper again. I just... I miss her... and I don’t know what I did wrong to make her keep... to keep giving up. On me. On us. I don’t know what I did wrong. What else was I supposed to do?”

I was crying now, undignified and embarrassing as it was. Priscilla didn’t hesitate—she came around the counter, putting an arm around me, and she pulled me into a hug, and I cried on her shoulder, letting myself be the ugly, humiliating mess I hadn’t let myself be with anyone since...

I sniffled, trying to pull it all back in. “Ugh, I’m a disaster—”

“Shh.” She patted me on the back. “C’mon. Be a disaster. Cry it out.”

“I don’t wanna.”

“Oh, yeah, you do.”

I sniffled. “I do,” I said, and I cried on her a while longer still, no idea what time it was anymore or where we even were, just sobbing while I gripped my hands into fists against her back, gritting my teeth and forcing in shaky breaths.

“Grief is unbearable,” she whispered. “The least you can do for yourself is not try to bear it alone.”

“Grief.” I snorted, pulling back and turning away, leaning against the counter feeling drunk. “I’m not the one grieving.”

She softened. “I know Harper was carrying such a huge burden... like she was living her whole life just for someone who wasn’t even there anymore.”

“It’s awful. But what’s the point in continuing to punish yourself—and everyone around you—for... for...” I gestured vaguely at the air, but something panged in my chest. “It doesn’t even... make any sense,” I said, quietly.

“I know it’s not—”

“It doesn’t make any sense,” I said again. “Why would Lindsay have gone driving? She was too young.”

Priscilla blinked. “Er... what?”

It reached me like an ocean of sadness, just drifting, floating lost in it, and I stared out the window. “Ugh... she’s always been so stubborn.”

“Well, you are one to talk...”

I let out a long sigh. “Hey, Prissy.”

“Ew. Don’t call me that.”

“What would you do in my position?”

“Call me by my actual name, first of all.”

“Okay, *Priscilla Sorenson*. What would you do in my position?”

She softened into a smile. “Why are you asking me? You already know.”

Yeah. That was a good question. “Let’s go to the party,” I said. “Although... is the bubble tea place still open or did you close them down too? I want to get matcha.”

Chapter 29

Harper

I was staring quietly at the picture—something I kept telling myself I had to stop doing—when Solomon caught me, leaning in the office door behind me and knocking on where the door stood open, most of the office empty around us by now. I turned back to him with a vague sheepish smile, setting the picture down.

“Hey. Sorry. Something up?”

“The graphics report—deadline on that’s been pushed back. Client’s in the Bahamas.”

“What, just like that?”

“Apparently someone invited him and he went the next day. Probably bribing him with a ticket. Frankly, I’d take the bribe and be gone the next day too. Anyway, pushed back to the first. Just letting you know so you don’t spend all weekend trying to get it done.”

I still would... I couldn’t let my mind wander for an instant these days. I was hoping it would numb this time faster than it had when I’d first moved to New York, but... somehow this time was worse.

“Thanks,” I said. “Will do.”

He glanced down at the picture. “Family?”

“Ah...” I looked back at the picture—the one that I decided to torture myself with every day by keeping on my desk. The overlook in front of the Rove estate, with Paisley sitting on the grassy bank, one knee pulled up into her chest, looking out at the horizon with that twinkling joy in her eyes that had inspired me to snap a subtle picture. The sunset haloing off her hair...

I must have looked too wistful, because Solomon faltered. “Er... special somebody?”

I'd never even mentioned I was bisexual. Was it that obvious just from how I looked at it? "She, er... she was."

He gave me a look of sympathy. I hated it—the last thing I needed right now. "I'm sorry."

He thought she was dead. *I* was the one who was dead, but I didn't want to correct him. "Don't worry about it. Some things are just... you experience it once and that's all you can get."

He softened. "She's very beautiful. I can tell she meant a lot to you."

"Mm." I let my gaze drift back to the picture, feeling like my chest was tearing like paper. "Absolute slob. No sense of boundaries. Loved her, though. Well... still do." I sighed, shutting my laptop and standing up. "Heading out, Sol?"

"Yeah..." The change of tone threw him, but he adjusted. Guy had a good sense for when I didn't want to talk about something. "Couple of buddies and I are going to a kitschy new club on 55th Street. Wanna come? Kind of a boys' club, though, I'll warn you."

"Nah. You have your guys' night. I'll see you on Monday, Sol."

"Have a good weekend, Harper." He turned, his footsteps clicking down the hallway, and I let my gaze go back to the picture, Paisley's hazel eyes radiant in the sunset.

Why the hell did I keep this thing here, anyway?

I picked it up, and—even though I felt like maybe I should drop it in the trash and let the cleaners take care of getting rid of it, I knew I wouldn't be able to. I tucked the picture into my bag, my laptop along with it, and I headed out of the room, shutting the door behind me.

Shouldn't have told Solomon. People didn't need to know things about me. Maybe now he'd think I was a lesbian and he'd move on from his interest in me, so I guess it wasn't all bad—anything to make people attach to me less.

How the hell was it so hard? It should have been an easy ask. But I just... some essential part of me reached out. Wanted to be loved. Wanted to love.

I'd been trying to kill that part of me for a decade now. Maybe I didn't know how. Maybe I just wanted to run home—back to Bayview—back to Paisley.

As if she'd take me back after I broke her heart again, anyway.

Footsteps came quickly behind me as I hit the elevator button, and I glanced back to where Susanna Holcomb came down the hall just in time to catch the elevator, opening in front of us. She smiled at me, looking exhausted.

“Hey, Harper,” she said. “Stayed late?”

Mostly just staring at Paisley's picture. “Julian in legal was getting antsy. Spent a while chatting with him and letting him know he wasn't going to lose his head in the new deal.”

She was quiet for a second, settling into the elevator with me and waiting as the doors shut. Once we started moving down towards the lobby, she said, “Harper, where are your sights set?”

“Pardon?”

“That's not in your job description. You're taking on a lot of upper executive functions when you haven't even been here a year.”

I shifted. “Is this an official reprimand?”

“You're filling two positions at once. I'm not complaining. I'm just wondering... people don't do that without some bigger career aspirations. So? What are you getting at?”

“Er...” How was I even supposed to say it? *I'm looking for a distraction so I don't die of heartache over a girl?* “Don't know,” I said, finally.

“You can be honest with me.”

“I am. I want to climb higher, but I don’t know concretely. I’m just trying to do everything I can, be everything I can.”

She gave me a cautious smile. “Just don’t burn yourself out, Harper. Even high achievers need a vacation.”

We reached the lobby, and Susanna took a left, heading for the garage with a hand raised my way.

“Have a good weekend. See you on Monday.”

“Have a good weekend...” I said it even though it came out as such a hollow ghost of a whisper that she couldn’t have heard it anyway, and I turned for the door, walking in a trance.

It was cold out, and I hadn’t worn enough layers. I hugged myself tightly against the bitter wind, and I took the subway back to my street, unlocking a door and heading up a cramped stairwell and up to my apartment on the third floor, wedging my key in the lock and throwing the door open.

I dropped my bag, shed my coat, and I took off the tie, hanging it up by the door, and I undid my shirt enough to pull the necklace out—the old thing I had no damn reason to be wearing—but I paused before I pulled it off, just feeling it between my fingers.

I really... regretted... leaving.

I crashed backwards onto the bed—I had a studio unit, even though I could comfortably afford a one-bed, just because why would I need more? I had everything I needed. Everything but her.

I lay in bed, staring at the small square of window over the kitchenette, my view looking out at the opposite building and the cramped alleyway below, and I rolled the beads of the necklace between my fingers. Just feeling them. Knowing she had run her fingers over this same necklace.

I swallowed, hard. I couldn’t *do* this. I knew what I needed to do, but there were times where the temptation was just too much, and I just... just let myself have it. Just a bit. And I let myself do what I was never supposed to do—

imagine what it would have been like if I'd stayed. Let myself imagine being with Paisley.

Hell, I didn't need to imagine. We'd been together for those weeks before I moved to New York, and I couldn't believe how easy it was to date Paisley. How right it felt to be her girlfriend, even if we never could.

I couldn't do this.

I rolled over and picked up my phone, dropping the necklace beads and focusing on emails. I didn't like to respond to emails outside office hours, because then I'd run out of things to do during office hours, but... desperate times, and all that. I scanned through, shooting off a series of quick replies, and when one of them asked about a graphic they'd been promised that I think there'd been a schedule miscommunication about, I rolled out of bed and up to my laptop, putting something together myself. Got rid of a good two and a half hours cross-referencing everything, pulling up all the information we needed, successfully burning through the painful evening quiet.

Except when I glanced at my inbox again, I felt like the floor dropped out when I saw an email from the last person I needed right now.

Paisley M. It felt like a knife in my gut.

Information Request.

What kind of a subject header was that? Like she was working with a client? I hovered over the delete button, but I hesitated there—frozen for seconds ticking by like hours, heart pounding, my throat tight—before I opened the email instead.

Good evening,

Sorry to email you this late on a Friday, but I've heard from sources that you're reliable even at this late hour.

I'm contacting you to ask a question I couldn't find anywhere on your website. I picked a name completely at random from your website's staff form.

I appreciate you taking the time to read and respond to me. Have a great evening.

Sincerely,

Paisley Macleod

I swallowed, pinching the bridge of my nose and forcing myself to take in a long breath. She even had terrible email etiquette. Who prompted like that without even saying the question?

Picked a name completely at random. Wasn't she cute. I guess I hadn't thought through scrubbing myself from everyone's lives—hadn't thought about the fact that Paisley knew my new employer. And that I'd told her I was corporate, so she knew she could find my email address on the website.

Dammit.

I deleted the email.

I hit it with a single tap, striking hard on the touchpad, and I watched it disappear with a cold sensation churning in my gut. Just... my inbox, staring back at me.

Work. My life. Forever.

God *dammit*.

I pushed my chair back, picked up my phone, and I texted her. I still remembered her number by heart, and I had a foreign sensation in my throat as I typed her number in.

You need to at least include the question in the email, I sent. My heart pounded like I was running, even though I tried to be casual—leaning against the back of the chair, one leg kicked up on the coffee table, looking out the window. Tried to be nonchalant, but I watched with every second ticking by like I had a time bomb in my hand.

And I almost dropped the phone when a text came through.

if you're going to text me, you might as well call me. I know I'm irresistible.

Why *was* she irresistible? Nobody else had ever felt like this before—all the people who had hurt to leave behind, it had always healed in the end. So why this? Why her?

Guess she'd already told me. Sometimes love just didn't make sense.

I called her. It connected faster than I was ready for.

"Hello, this is Paisley Macleod speaking," she said. "Thank you for agreeing to engage with this matter despite the late hour."

God, even when she was being like this, her voice made my chest ache—felt like I was home again, wrapped up where it was safe. And I felt like a damn fool for ever having left.

"Paisley... come on," I said, trying to will my voice not to shake. Absently, I fingered the necklace, feeling the cool touch on my fingertips. "Fine. I'll play. Not an issue—I was handling some other correspondence anyway. What can I help you with, Miss Macleod?"

"I was wondering," she said. "Maybe this isn't the right place to ask, but I hope you can point me where I need to go if need be."

"Mm. Should be."

"Could you tell me... does this hurt you as much as it hurts me?"

My throat tightened so much I could barely breathe. My vision swam, and I had to swallow twice to get it down. "It's..." My voice came out dry, scratchy on my throat. "It's definitely the right place to ask. I happen to be the one in charge of that."

"Oh, perfect. Talk about lucky."

I rolled my chair up next to the window, looking out at the sliver of sky I could see between my building and the next. "Leaning... leaning towards yes," I said, my voice low. "Yes, it hurts. A lot."

She was quiet for a long time, just the chatter in the background over the line. I wasn't sure where she was—a

party or something. Maybe one of Emberlynn's impromptu get-togethers. I missed being at them—fighting with Paisley over the beers I brought, laughing at something Annabel did until I was bent double at the waist, gushing over Emberlynn's cooking and pretending to change my mind about how much I liked it when Paisley piped in about how much she helped.

"I have another question," she said. "A follow-up question, I guess."

"Let's hear it."

"Do you still wear that necklace?"

I looked down at it, clenching it in my hand. "Sometimes," I said.

"Do you still have that picture?"

I glanced back at the bag, my chest tight now. "I... guess so."

"Am I in the picture?"

I paused. "I think... it's safe to say yes."

"Another question," she said.

"Mm-hm?"

"Do you want to see me again?"

I clutched the phone tighter, feeling the edges of it dig into my hand. "Paisley..."

"I got coffee. And I ordered your favorite, too."

I paused. "I... believe it would get cold before I could get there anyway."

She laughed. "Is it that far out of the way? Given the punch cards I saw in your wallet when you visited Bayview, there's no way you're walking hours to get here."

It took too long to settle in. I blinked fast, staring at the window, and I found myself standing up, my heart racing. "You're here," I said, voice tight.

"It's a loud city. Even at night. How do you sleep here?"

“Paisley—when did you—”

“I told the barista I’m waiting for you and asked if you have a regular, so you have a soy cappuccino with your name on it here.”

“Oh my god. Why are you—”

“Why?” She laughed. “Why do you think?”

I fumbled the phone, my heart hammering, and I hung up the call. I stood there at the window just staring for what might have been forever before I bolted—I wasn’t sure what it was, but something came over me, and I hurried for the door so quickly I almost tripped, catching myself on the closet door and holding it as I stepped into my shoes, pulled on the warmest coat I had, and I barely paused to grab my keys before I was out the door. I took the stairs down two at a time and rounded into the street, nearly taking out an old man who was walking past, and I gushed apologies as I raced around him and tore down the street, my whole body burning.

The front door of my regular café—of course she saw the damn punch cards—I flung it open, stumbling over the step at the entrance, and Joyce behind the counter smiled warmly at me, nodding to the corner. I followed her gaze, over to where—a surreal image, not sure if I was dreaming, Paisley Macleod sat at the corner table, by the window.

She smiled at me. She was so... so beautiful when she smiled. I wished I could have just...

Maybe I could.

I moved in a trance, walking over to her table, and I sat down across from her—she was dressed casually now, wearing her glasses again, her hair a little messy, but she was wearing her yellow coat. Her favorite.

“Paisley,” I said, simply. Maybe that was all that could be said.

She smiled. “I’m not gonna lie, I was hoping for better coffee from your favorite place.”

“Did you get the drip coffee?”

“Yeah. It tastes like burned rubber.”

“Yeah, the place sucks at drip coffee. I come here for espresso.”

She made a face. “Well, now she tells me.”

“Paisley... why are you here?”

She tucked her hair back behind her ear, looking up shyly at me. “I wanted to ask you another question.”

God, I already knew what the question was. And I... I didn't know how to answer it. There was nothing in the world I wanted more than to go back, to turn it all back and be happy where I was—but I knew I couldn't, and it was...

“You could have included all these questions in the email,” I said. She laughed.

“Some things are more impactful in person. And I wanted to make sure if you tried to run away, then I could tackle you to the ground.”

I swallowed. “I'm not running,” I said. “Go ahead. Ask your question.”

She gave me an odd kind of smile, her head cocked a little, and she said, “You're... you aren't Harper, are you?”

I'd just picked up the paper cup for my cappuccino, and it slipped out of my hand, thumping back down on the table's surface. A cold sensation swept through me, and I struggled to breathe as something pounded in my head. “I... what?”

“You're Lindsay.”

“No... I... what?” I pushed my chair backwards, my throat tight, everything swimming around me. Paisley reached across the table, and she took my hand.

“Lindsay was too young to be driving. You left it to your older sister, Harper, to look after herself. And when she died...”

“No,” I said, my voice hoarse. I couldn't see straight anymore. I thought I might fall down, might pass out.

“You thought it should have been you. So... you made it so. And your mother was already forgetting Lindsay existed, so when Lindsay didn’t exist anymore... who was going to notice?”

I stood up, my heart pounding so hard I thought I’d throw up. “I... Paisley, I can’t... I’m sorry,” I blurted. I didn’t know what I was saying. I barely heard myself. I turned, and I—I just—I left. I ran away.

I pushed out the door, stumbling over pavement in a confused, dizzy rush, and I wasn’t sure where I was or what was going on until I was in the park, quiet here in the dark, standing at a stone railing looking out on the nighttime skyline, leaning on the railing and breathing hard.

The wind murmured in the tree branches. The sounds of the city from all around were distant enough through the trees that it was like a far-off sigh, letting go of everything.

A *tap* came from next to me as Paisley set down my cappuccino on the wall, leaning against it next to me, cast in the warm glow of the streetlamp, but she didn’t say anything—just looking out at the skyline. My heart pounded, a surreal feeling like I didn’t belong in my body.

Of course, to be fair, I didn’t belong in it. I hadn’t for a long time.

“Why are you following me?” I whispered, clenching my hands on the railing, feeling the coarse stone grinding against my knuckles.

“Because I want you to know I love you.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. She slipped closer, putting a hand on my lower back.

“As Lindsay,” she said, and it dug into me like a hot knife—I whirled on her, taking a step back, bumping into the wall. I had to swallow hard trying to get the lump down.

“I’m not—that’s not my name,” I said, my voice shaking so hard it was barely words.

She smiled, softly, sweetly. I just... I... crumbled. I collapsed against the railing, sinking onto the rough stone floor, and I hugged my knees into my chest, looking ahead at where the grass swayed in the wind. Paisley sat next to me, cupping her coffee in both hands, sipping delicately at it.

It was a long time before she spoke. “Told me yourself, you’d reinvented yourself too. That you were a gloomy kid. Funny now looking back.”

I swallowed. I felt... so... small. Fourteen years old again. Fourteen years old and alone, forgotten, sitting in a dirty bedroom playing with Harper’s toys.

“Nobody’s... called me that name... in a long time,” I breathed.

“Get the feeling nobody said your name much before then, either.” She handed me my cappuccino, which was so... so... sweet of her. She brought it all this way. I cupped it in both hands.

“Harper did,” I whispered. She smiled, sweetly, my way—sweet in all the ways I didn’t deserve.

“What was she like?”

I breathed out, slow, shaky. I was... so glad it was Paisley who found out. Nobody else in the world would make it feel okay. “Better. Than me. It should have been me...” I shook my head. “I’d always wanted to disappear anyway. Always thought it wouldn’t change anything if I... did. Harper wasn’t. She was so... so alive. Had dreams. She wanted to be a baker. Run her own shop. Wanted to live in New York.”

She looked down at her coffee. “So it didn’t matter if they didn’t make you happy. They were Harper’s dreams, so... so becoming Harper meant making her dreams come true.”

“It was just...” My voice was a thin stream through the tears, hot against my face. “I just... wanted to make it okay... wanted to make it up to her. I’d never lived for anything before... I figured what did it matter? I didn’t have any dreams to give up for—to make hers come true instead.”

“And you did,” she said, putting a hand on my arm. “Every one of them, from the sounds of things.”

“But I...” I rested an arm on my knees, burying my face in it and crying, softly, but so much—so much and I couldn’t make it stop. “But it didn’t... do anything. Nothing’s changed. She’s still... gone. And it’s my fault. It’s my fault she’s—”

She put a hand on my shoulder. “Lindsay,” she said, softly, and it was like an electric shock down my spine. I turned back to her, breathless, wide-eyed, jolted out of the tears, and she smiled softly. “Hey. Lindsay. You were a superhero. Two kids being scrappy fighting in a system they shouldn’t have to be in, and you helped save her so many times already. But even a superhero makes mistakes too sometimes. You were... you were fourteen, Lindsay.”

I didn’t know if I... dared to believe it. It felt too tempting, too easy, too good—this idea that maybe I was forgivable, that we could wipe the past clean. I didn’t think I was allowed to believe it, but I wanted to... so, so badly. I looked back down at my coffee, holding it tight in both hands. “Why was it her, Paisley?”

She mulled it over, looking down at the ground. At length, she spoke quietly. “I guess because... life is small, delicate, fragile. Ready to vanish at any second. Even the ones who shine brightest might have flickered out the next time you see them. And I think that little... fragile... fleeting bit of life we all have is too beautiful to let it go to waste by not really living in the first place.”

“But it’s like I... like I stole her life for myself,” I said, my voice hot in my throat. “And I just wish... I could see her just one more time.”

She squeezed my shoulder. “I think maybe the people who leave us are always around us. I know... if something happened to you, I’d still see you in every leaf, in every sunrise, in every little thing in this world. If Harper is right here in the wind, what do you think you’d say to her?”

It flooded me like someone had opened the gates and it all poured in at once—a torrent of grief that washed over me

until I was swept away, carried back to when I'd been supposed to grieve in the first place. When I'd cut my hair short shakily with kitchen shears in the bathroom mirror, matching Harper's. When I went to her school wearing my hood up hoping nobody noticed the difference, and struggled, swamped in lectures beyond my level, and teachers pulled me aside to tell me how I'd been *such a bright student and now this*.

When I got the night-shift job at a bakery that Harper had been thinking about applying for. When I used the money to get the tattoos Harper had wanted once she was older and had more money.

When I'd looked at myself in the mirror and struggled to remember what my name had been.

It wasn't fair. To anyone. We didn't *both* need to die.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered, voice thick with tears. "I'm so sorry I didn't help... I'm so sorry nobody helped. I wish you were still here. I wish... I wish you could see the... the life we have now. I think..." I sniffled, choking on words, and I wiped the tears off my cheek before I pushed out the words. "I think you'd like it... a lot."

And I think you'd like Paisley.

I wanted—so, so badly—for her to meet Paisley. They'd probably have gotten along. Harper would have given me a hard time—she'd always been *really* into boys, so the idea of dating a woman was probably so foreign to her, she'd laugh and ask me if boys were all that bad—but she'd have pulled me aside later to tell me how much fun Paisley was and that she wouldn't forgive me if I fumbled it.

Paisley touched a hand lightly to my shoulder. "I'm sure she's proud of you," she breathed. I choked, forcing myself to breathe in deeper.

She... she would be. It had always been us against the world, the two of us making it work. Argued all the time, but we had each other's backs. I was so damn jealous of her all the

time, and so often I wanted to never see her again, but I wanted her to succeed. To be happy.

And she'd have wanted the same for me. To just find what made me happy and get it.

"Do you..." I started, struggling to keep away from the thick, hot stream of tears again. "Do you think she'd forgive me?"

She smiled softly. "I think you'll have to tell me."

I looked back at where the wind brushed the grass, sweeping gently through the branches. So... soft. Untethered. Free.

She'd have whacked me over the head and told me to stop moping. And to quit it with the identity theft.

I think that was how she would say *there's nothing to forgive, it wasn't your fault.*

I laughed, wiping at my eyes. "You know, I, uh," I started, pausing for a sip of coffee. Somehow, it wasn't too cold. "I think she'd have liked you, actually."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. She liked causing trouble. She would absolutely have helped you breed lizards."

She laughed, leaning back against the stone wall, holding her coffee up to her nose. "Emberlynn would have gotten a kick out of me having accomplices."

"I bet she'd have fit into Bayview well..."

She smiled softly at me. "But I'm glad you survived, Lindsay. Against all odds. And made it to Bayview."

I thought—for the first time, honestly—and I said it out loud, too, "I am too."

"Hey... now that you've achieved all these dreams for her sake. What kind of dreams do you think *you* have?"

"Er..." I shifted. "I think I've been over that Lindsay... um... I... don't really have—"

“*Didn’t* really have. You’ve lived ten years since then. I’m sure you’ve found something.”

“Ah, well...” I scratched my head. It was an odd sensation settling in now that the tears were drying—a lightness I wasn’t sure I’d ever experienced. Like I was the wind now. “Not sure.”

“Do you like baking enough you want to keep doing it?”

It would have been so easy to say yes. But something else inside me spoke. “I bet it’d be fun to write a book.”

“What, really?” She whipped her head over to look at me. “With a purple-haired mind-reading protagonist?”

“Yeah, maybe,” I laughed. “I loved reading... didn’t let myself do it after it happened. Harper didn’t like books in the same way, so... I had to be Harper. But I think now I’d like... I’d like to be Lindsay again.”

She gave me a wild-eyed smile. “Um... hey, H—er. Lindsay.”

I could... kind of... get used to her calling me that. I felt bare, exposed, but not in a bad way... a wall I’d had so long I’d forgotten it was there come down and suddenly I could just be a person again. “Yeah?”

“I know it’s a bit out of left field, but I’ve got a bookstore you could take over.”

I blinked fast.

“I mean, let’s be honest. I’m not the bookstore type. I haven’t read a novel in over a year. And I kind of like the bakery. Gives me an excuse to be nosy in everyone’s lives.”

“You’re... asking me to move back to Bayview.”

“If we’re being direct? Yes. Come home. And be my girlfriend. I love you. And I want to be *Lindsay and Paisley* everywhere we go.”

It felt like a lurch, the sheer reality of it—of how badly I wanted nothing in this world like I wanted that—how much everything I ever wanted and never even realized was possible

just settled down in front of me, in the form of this *girl* who just... never made sense in anything she did.

Of course it was her. Who else but the woman who climbed trees to get on my roof instead of using the damn door?

“Is it really okay...?” My voice came out a tiny whisper, trembling. Paisley smiled wider, and she caressed my cheek, her fingers warm, soft against my skin in the chill of the night.

“Have I been subtle at any one point in this process? I love you, Lindsay.”

I choked on the feeling—those three little words and *that* name—and somehow it had me so delirious I just laughed. “You have your glasses on again.”

She touched them. “Oh. Yeah. What, are they a dealbreaker? Only into me with the contacts?”

“Nah. I’d forgotten how cute you look in these. I like you dressed up, too, though.”

She grinned. “You’d better. I contain multitudes, and you’re getting all of them if you sign up for me.”

Nothing in this world sounded better. “I love you, too.”

She crinkled her eyes in a smile, and she leaned in and pressed her lips to mine, and everything in this world was perfect.

Everything.

She parted, not far, and rested her forehead on mine. “Let’s go home.”

“I, uh... I mean, I should put in my two weeks’ at work.”

She made a face. “Ugh, I forgot you had that awful, evil job that stole you away to this place.”

“Mm. Well, I wasn’t planning a career change right now.”

“Hey, we’re still young. No better time for a new career than...” She made a face. “Wait a second. Does that mean

you're twenty-four?"

"Oh... I guess so." I scratched my head. "Got used to faking my age."

"Oh my god. You're *younger* than me?"

"Oh. Yeah. Does that matter?"

She put her hands up. "Does it *matter*? Oh my god. You're *younger* than me. I'm going to patronize the hell out of you."

I blinked. "Like that's new?"

She grinned, standing up. "C'mon. Your hot older girlfriend is getting tired of sitting on the ground."

"Oh, I see now what this is going to be like..."

She offered me a hand. "If you're not dropping your job and running back to Bayview right away, you might as well at least let me stay at your place."

I took her hand, letting her help me up, and I arched my eyebrows at her. "Mooching off your younger girlfriend?"

She beamed. When she didn't say anything, I put a hand on my hip.

"What? Regretting it when I say it like that?"

"I don't regret a thing when you're calling yourself my girlfriend." She stepped in and caught me in a wild kiss so fast and intense I almost spilled my coffee, putting a hand up and fumbling against her for a second before I softened and let the kiss go on as long as we wanted, Paisley holding me as the wind rustled our hair and the branches all around us.

She pulled away with a twinkle in her eyes, slipping her hand into mine.

"C'mon, Linds. Let's go home."

I'd been Lindsay again for two seconds and she was already shortening it?

Ah, what the hell. I kinda liked it.

Epilogue

Paisley

Emberlynn caught me swiping the cheese from the counter, and she swatted my arm as I popped a piece in my mouth.

“Paisley!” She positioned herself between me and the cheese, the scheming rat. “There won’t be any left for dinner if you keep picking at the food.”

“You get my help with cooking, you pay the Paisley Tax.”

“I’m cooking for a party for *your* girlfriend. And doing it out of my own kitchen because you can’t clean up your own. I should be charging you the Emberlynn Tax.”

Soft footsteps padded in through the doorway, and Aria leaned in from where she was helping set up in the living room. “Emberlynn. You can’t argue with Paisley, you always lose.”

Emberlynn gave her a helpless look. “Aria. You’re supposed to back me up.”

Aria smiled softly. “I love you, dear, and that’s why I’m trying to convince you the fight isn’t worth fighting instead.”

I darted in while Emberlynn was looking at Aria and snagged another piece of cheese, running laughing from the room as Emberlynn stumbled over herself chasing me through the house. I nearly took out Gwen, who had the bad sense to stand in the middle of the optimal path for escaping from Emby, but in the middle of the scramble, I was betrayed by my own sister, who went ahead and put the cheese into the soup. I got back into the kitchen just in time to witness it, and I put my hands on my hips.

“Ar! I was eating that.”

Aria didn't look away from where she stirred the soup. "Indeed you were."

"You're the worst sister I've ever had."

"I'd believe it."

I at least managed to shoo her out of the kitchen before she caused any further damage, and Emberlynn and I were cooking together a bit longer, chatting about wild gossip that was mostly just me rambling, until the tray of breads went into the oven and the soup was simmering, and I leaned against the stovetop with nothing left to do in the kitchen. Emberlynn gave me a wry smile.

"You're so antsy," she said. "Suddenly scared to death of Linds?"

"About time you quit calling her Harper."

She put her hands up. "Hey, I'm trying. Old habits die hard. You get your hands on her for one second and suddenly she has a different name and a different occupation, and I'm supposed to believe you didn't just find a different girl to replace her?"

I stuck my tongue out. "Please. You need confirmation, ask her for some of the dirty secrets you know she has on us both."

"Too true." She laughed. "Hey, I won't pretend going to New York can't change you a bit as a person. At least I came back with the same name."

It had only been a few months, the blossoms of spring starting to come out again, and Lindsay still hadn't found the space to tell anyone why the name change. But Bayview was relaxed as always and just happy she'd quit trying to run away—the move back to Bayview was seamless, and I still woke up some mornings just a little bit giddy that she was here to stay and I got her to myself.

Aside from people constantly fumbling calling her Harper and having to stumble correcting themselves, everyone was just glad she was back. She'd tell everyone one day—had told me herself that she wanted to and just needed more time.

She could take all the time she needed. I'd gotten her hooked in, and she was stuck in Bayview for life now.

"I'm not *scared* of my girlfriend, I just want her party to be perfect. And I'm not accepting my awful friend doing anything to ruin it."

"Who was the one eating the ingredients for the dinner?"

"What a great question! I don't know."

She laughed, swatting me with a potholder. "It's going to be *fine*, Pais. I know how to put together an event. You just want red carpets to spoil your girlfriend."

I rolled my eyes. "Like you're any better? Making out with my sister right in front of me every fifteen minutes..."

"You think more about me making out with Aria than I do. Fix your mind." Her expression softened, a gentle smile creasing the corners of her eyes. "Lindsay's going to love it, okay? She's been happy in a way I'm not used to since she came back, and it's really good to see. Seems like she actually gives a damn about the books at the shop, unlike its previous owner."

"Yeah, turned out books weren't my thing any more than lizard breeding was."

"Bets on how long you'll actually last running the bakery?"

I laughed. "Hell if I know. It's fun right now, though. Not gonna be the end of the world if I change my mind. Not like I'll regret having done it. You and your stuck-in-the-mud girlfriend could take notes."

"I'll die before I'm taking notes from you, weirdo," she laughed, and I heard the front door rattle and push open, and I forgot the entire conversation instantly and nearly pushed Emberlynn over sprinting towards the door.

Blue hair. I deflated. Kay stepped in through the door with a big, bright smile, holding a tray of bubble tea, and she waved. "Hey, Pais!"

"Yeah, just give me my tea."

She laughed. “You’d been hoping to see your girlfriend, huh?”

I looked away. “You take way too much joy in that word. Be smug about it and I’ll bite you.”

“Wouldn’t it be a problem if she were here right now? Kind of ruins the surprise party if it were her here now...”

“Shush. Sometimes I get excited and I stop thinking. And don’t make any comments about why I’m excited.”

“Mm-hm.” She handed me two cups of tea. “Well, here’s one for you, and one for your *girlfriend*,” she sang, stretching out the word, and I took the two of them, hunching my shoulders.

“Yeah, yeah. You’re just jealous my girlfriend is way more interesting than yours.”

“What? Oh my god.” She put her free hand on her hip. “Gwen’s perfect.”

“Gwen’s about as fun as watching paint dry, but I guess you do you, Kay.”

She laughed, eyes sparkling. “Hey, it takes all sorts, you know? Even you!”

“That sounds a lot like an insult, but I assume you wouldn’t have the boldfaced audacity to insult Paisley Macleod to her face.”

Annabel showed up behind me and saved me from Kay insulting me any further by saying how her boring girlfriend was in the back garden with Aria, and I made myself useful by frantically pacing the place until the appointed time. Once the fated time finally arrived and Annabel and Aria had their share of laughs at how much I was tormenting Emberlynn in anticipation, I crouched by the couch waiting in bated silence as footsteps came up to the front door. And not a moment too soon, because my legs were starting to cramp.

The door unlatched and swung open. “Paisley—” Lindsay’s voice called, but she didn’t get a chance to fit another word in. I jumped out shouting *surprise* or maybe I

was just shouting, I always got excited and lost track of it—I bumped the lamp and Emberlynn had to stop it from falling over, and Lindsay stopped suddenly in the doorway, lurching and nearly falling over as we all cheered for her. Lindsay hung her head. “Paisley—Jesus Christ. I said it’s not a big deal.”

I flung myself on her, falling into her so she had to stumble with a grunt to catch me and keep upright, and I buried my face in her shoulder. “I decide what’s a big deal, and you know it.”

Lindsay—who I’d kind of attacked while she was carrying a shopping bag—shifted to hold her bag better, and I stepped back to let her set it down, giving me the kind of weary smile I was low-key obsessed with her giving me all the time. Nobody else in the world who could be so sick of me and still love me.

Wild how she could look the same and so different. She still dressed in her clean, sensible style, not really showing off her tattoos but not hiding them either, but there was just that... weight that was gone now. The distant expression in her eyes, the heavy shadow she always had around her, just gone. And the cute little almost-dimples she got when she smiled at me.

Couldn’t believe I ever bullshitted myself hard enough to think I wasn’t in love with this girl.

“Congratulations, big star author,” I said, and she sighed, raking her fingers back through her hair.

“For Christ’s sake, it’s a first draft. Of a book that isn’t even very good. And that’s not even getting into publishing—”

I put a finger to her lips. “Shush,” I said. “You’re a star author. Paisley’s decided it.”

She looked away. “So I guess the party means you told everyone.”

Emberlynn cleared her throat from behind me. “She told me, and I asked her if she was supposed to tell me, and she changed the subject and left the room...”

Lindsay pinched the bridge of her nose. “Any chance we can dedicate this party to something else before I die of

embarrassment?”

Priscilla walked past me, pressing a can of Lindsay’s favorite strawberry shandy into her hand and taking the bag. “Your girlfriend’s just excited for you,” she said. “Don’t worry. Parties in Bayview forget what they were supposed to be about in ten minutes anyway and just turn into parties. But for the record... finishing the draft of your first book is also exciting. And as your friends, we’re excited for you.”

Lindsay gave her a soft, grateful smile. I put my hand on Priscilla’s shoulder, leaning in to face her. “That’s sweet and all, but no more hitting on my girlfriend,” I said. “In case you haven’t noticed, she’s mine and I don’t share.”

Lindsay looked away sharply, a blush creeping over her cheeks. “Paisley.”

Priscilla smiled sweetly at me. “You sure? Sharing’s fun.”

I didn’t give her the dignity of a response.

Lindsay sighed, settling into a soft smile. “Thanks, Priscilla. I, er... I mean, you’ve been there a lot for me.”

“Likewise.” She tucked her hair back with a soft smile. “You’ve grown a lot. You’re looking a lot happier these days.”

Priscilla turned back, one last glance with a sweet smile over her shoulder at the two of us before she headed back towards where the rest of the party was waiting—looking all smug, the little jerk. I had a good feeling she’d put together more than she let on about Lindsay, and she was just giving her the time and space to say it herself one day, and let it be known that I, Paisley Macleod, would never be possessive enough to get jealous that somebody else knew my girlfriend Lindsay’s secrets even just a little bit.

Annabel raised her hand over the crowd gathered in the living room. “Look, Linds, we love you and we’re proud of you, but we do not love you enough to stand here next to a cake all day while you hang out in the doorway...”

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Lindsay sighed, walking inside, slipping her hand into mine so naturally, so much

without a shadow of thought going into it, that all the jealous feelings I may or may not have had were instantly gone.

I was just proud I got to show her off. Not like anyone could blame me for it, since I had the hottest girlfriend in all Bayview.

Priscilla was right about one thing—we all forgot quickly enough what the party was supposed to be about, and we shared food and laughed together, with Lindsay abjectly avoiding the subject every time her book came up. Annabel was about the only one who didn't try to grill her about it—she'd been the only one who had never slipped up on Lindsay's name and had never even seemed to dream of prying for more, forever too busy with girls to think about gossip. We sliced a cake that was admittedly not my best work but I was *learning*, and we collapsed along the couch, over the chairs, and a couple of us on the floor for lack of space, and I made Emberlynn go red by blaring a full playlist of her songs, and we gushed and chattered about everything and about nothing—and most importantly, about what the juicy gossip going down with Jenna and Sam opening their relationship and the burning question of *who* was the temptation who got them to do it—and one way or another, night fell, and of course it was boring-ass Gwen who was the first to leave.

“I've got some design documents to draft,” she said airily as she packed up her things. I tossed a pillow at her, and she didn't even try to dodge or deflect it, just looked at me while it bounced off her.

“You didn't even compliment my girlfriend *once* on her great book.”

“For all we know, it might be a terrible book,” Gwen said.

“It absolutely is,” Lindsay said, looking away.

“You're officially uninvited from all future events, Gwen, you jerkface,” I said, folding my arms.

“Delighted. If only you'll stick to that this time instead of forgetting the next time you have an event.”

Kay latched onto her arm, smiling at me. “When she says design documents, I actually just asked her help with recording a video...”

“I’m going now,” Gwen said entirely too quickly, heading for the door. I snorted, looking at where Aria raised a hand off of Emberlynn’s back to wave goodbye.

“Don’t *you* have design documents to do?” I deadpanned. “Have to go scheme for your next billion-dollar enterprise.”

Aria smiled warmly. “Billion-dollar enterprises are overrated. The current project is getting off the ground enough I have more free time, and I plan to spend tomorrow morning hiking with your best friend like the terrible sister I am.”

I made a gagging sound, turning back to Lindsay and resting my head on her shoulder. “You’re the only one left who I still like. The only bastion of goodness in a terrible, cruel world.”

She planted a kiss against the side of my head, and suddenly nothing bad existed anywhere in the world anymore. “Explains why you refused to let me leave.”

“Well, yeah. You leave me alone and I get bored and start breeding lizards. You know, I considered taking up model rocketry when you first moved to New York...”

“Guess it’s a good thing you found me, or Bayview wouldn’t be left standing.”

Priscilla gave Lindsay a hug and a quiet *I know we’re not acknowledging this, but congratulations again and I can’t wait to read it* on her way out, and Annabel caught us in the entryway as we were getting ready to head out for the long trek over to my house six steps over. Lindsay rolled her eyes with a dry smile as Annabel just looked at her, ignoring my plight where I was fumbling getting my shoes on.

“Just spit it out,” Lindsay said.

“Say hypothetically you had just finished the draft of a book,” Annabel said. “What would be your next steps from here?”

Lindsay laughed. “What a fantastic question.”

“Always have been the type to go unrelentingly after something. Whether it’s for someone else or for yourself.”

Lindsay looked away. “How much has Priscilla told you about, anyway?”

“You know Scil doesn’t share secrets. I just know you pretty well... know the *other girls* thing wasn’t really the whole reason we ended.”

I folded my arms. “Are you talking about having dated my girlfriend right in front of me? While I’m full up on lethal energy and cake?”

Lindsay dropped her gaze, softening against the wall. “Sorry things were... messy. I feel like I gave you a complex.”

“Hey. Things happened the way they did, and they led me to Scil. I’m happy. And I’m happy for you.” She glanced over at me with a sly smile before looking back to Lindsay. “Especially because you two seem *very* happy.”

Lindsay brushed her hair back, giving Annabel a sweet smile. “I, ah... I’m a lucky woman like that. Fell in love with the one woman who wouldn’t let me self-sabotage by running away.”

I put my hands up. “Sue me if I know what I want and I go after it.”

Annabel nudged my shoulder. “Hey, you look happy, too, Pais. Bakery life treating you well, from the looks of things.”

“I mean, now that I have every morning shift covered and I don’t have to wake up at four in the morning anymore, life’s good. Now, I am taking my pretty girlfriend and going, especially since your girlfriend is shivering in the cold outside and you probably have another girl at home right now waiting for you.”

“Oh, you know. Just a couple.” She raised a hand as she headed out the door. “Catch you later, you two. Coming to the show on Sunday? Nancy won’t forgive you if you don’t show

up. She's been talking about it ever since she got out of the hospital."

"Oh, crap, I forgot about the show," I said. "Yeah, I'll be there. Unless I forget again."

Lindsay nudged me. "I'll remind her. We'll be there."

"See you then," she said, shutting the door behind her. Lindsay headed out the door not long after, but Emberlynn caught me in the doorway while I was fumbling with my coat.

"Hey, Pais," she said. "I know this is a rushed time to ask, but... are you feeling better?"

I blinked at her. "Nah, still got the tuberculosis. Been hacking up blood all day. I only got a little bit in the soup, though."

"Don't say that. If anyone actually would, it's you." She leaned against the wall, giving me an odd smile. "Just... you switch between glasses and contacts a lot."

Oh, we were doing the veiled language game, huh? I rolled my eyes, turning away with a dry smile. "Yeah, yeah. I look good in both."

"You look... fine."

"You'd better be glad I've sworn eternal allegiance to our sisterly blood bond. Otherwise I'd break you over my knee for insulting Lindsay's girlfriend."

She laughed. "So, when you two getting married?"

I stuck out my tongue at her. "Oh, you know. Could be tomorrow, could be the day after."

"Are you going to bake the cake for your own wedding?"

"No, Lindsay's definitely doing it. Already cleared the subject with her."

She laughed, eyes sparkling, before she swatted my arm. "All right, I'll let you go spend an entire night gawking at your girlfriend. Can't afford to piss you off since I'm counting on

you to climb in the window and scare my mom once she visits again.”

“I know. You’re not scary enough. Catch you later, loser.”

“See you, dork,” she said, as I headed out the door and caught up with Lindsay, who was waiting by the door to my house, looking up from her phone as I approached her.

“You could have gone inside instead of freezing your cute little nose off,” I said.

“It’s forty degrees out. I think I’ll live.” She opened the door, letting me inside, and we didn’t even get our coats off before I crashed into her, kissing her wildly before settling into cuddling softly against her shoulder.

“You know you’re totally unbelievable,” I said. “Finishing your first book in, like, three months?”

“Oh, we’re back on the book...” She looked away. “It’s fine.”

“You’re going to be a big-name star and all the girls will want you.”

“They can try,” she said lightly. “I’ve got the one I want.”

“Oh my god,” I said, swatting her. “Stop! You’ll make me squeal and it’ll be embarrassing for us both.”

She laughed, catching me and pressing a kiss to my lips before she tugged me towards the stairs. “Hey, I love you. Let me be mushy sometimes.”

I went with her up the stairs and out to the balcony, leaning against her side as we both sank against the railing. “Fine,” I mumbled, finally. “Not like I don’t *like* it when you’re mushy.”

She kissed my forehead, and I think the only thing I could have ever wanted in the world was for her to do it again. “Then I’ll keep going,” she said. “I love you.”

“Mm. I love you too, pretty girl.”

“And I’m glad you found me.” She looked down, her expression softening. “Really... really found me.”

I closed my eyes, resting against her shoulder. “I like seeing your smile. *Your* smile.”

“Oh, now who’s mushy?”

“Signs point to me.” I nuzzled my face against her shoulder. “You know... I think she’d be proud to see you’ve done all this.”

“Mm.” She folded her arms on the railing, leaning forwards. “I think so. But I think more about someone else these days.”

I sighed, softly, just letting myself melt into her and into this moment—the two of us, and the taste of the Bayview breeze slightly salty in the air, promising rain before too long. Far off down the street below, I could still see Annabel’s and Priscilla’s silhouettes disappearing down the road, and the sound of Aria and Emberlynn laughing together about something from the house next door filled the air with something soft.

Funny little family we had out here. I liked it, though.

The End

- and thank you -

- from the whole Bayview crew -

Thank You

To a very special reader: thank you so much for reading Paisley's and Lindsay's story, and thank you for being a part of the Bayview story. It's an enormous honor to bring this series to a close, and having you along for the ride means a lot.

I hope you've enjoyed Every Little Thing and the Bayview Romances trilogy! If so, it would be a huge help if you could leave a review, just to say a little something you liked about the book (or dislike, I won't take it personally). Reviews are the single biggest thing that helps an indie author like me, so it means a ton to have you share your thoughts!

Also, if you're not already on my mailing list, you can sign up at lilyseabrooke.com and get a free copy of a book you can only get through my mailing list as well as access to advance review copies for all my future books!

Thank you again for reading! You're genuinely the best ever. I checked, so no arguments.

As always, with love,

- Lily

About The Author

Lily Seabrooke



Lily Seabrooke is a lesbian, trans woman, and author of sapphic romance that stars food, because odds are, at any given time, she's hungry.

Her interests include eating food, thinking about food, writing novels about food, and drinking coffee.

Books By This Author

One Last Shot

Ava couldn't be less like her popstar twin sister—and now she needs to take her place.

A two-month tour impersonating her pop-sensation twin sister Eva—or Nova on stage—sounds like Ava Blakely's worst nightmare. For one thing, she can't sing, and being on a stage is her idea of torture.

But it might be the only way to save Eva's pregnancy.

Tour photographer Freja Callister just wanted a vacation and some pizza, but a last-minute request to shoot the Nova tour pulls her in—especially when the popstar seems a little different than she remembers. And much too interested in Freja now.

For Ava, falling for her photographer while hiding her real identity is a catastrophe in the making. But hey, what do they have to lose?

The Rules Of Love

Rule number one: never fall in love.

Amber's rules have kept her safe from heartbreak—an oath to herself not to fall in love. But when her career as a romance novelist suffers for it, a vacation to her hometown brings her face-to-face with her childhood crush Celeste, and suddenly, none of her rules are enough to keep her away.

Celeste is intent on fighting her feelings for women and committing to her boyfriend Logan, but meeting her childhood crush Amber on a trip home for a family friend's wedding throws her carefully constructed life into disarray.

Sometimes, heartbreak is the only way through to healing. But sometimes, a love story will never really go away.

Fake It

Avery Lindt finally opened her dream restaurant, but there's a problem: there's *não* customers. When she ends up on the other end of restaurant mogul Mike Wallace's smear campaign, too, everyone loses hope but her.

Meanwhile, celebrity chef Holly Mason needs a refresh for her image, before her slimy ex-boyfriend Mike hijacks her show. The solution? Holly brings Avery onto her show to take down Mike's restaurant conglomeration together—and starts a rumor they're dating.

The only problem is this finicky attraction between them, too powerful to resist, but they absolutely can't afford to give in and make the rumor into reality. No matter how much their pretend dates start to feel like reality...