



fighting WORDS

a standalone romantic comedy

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

R.S. GREY



Fighting Words

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authorrsgrey@gmail.com

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Fighting Words is a full-length standalone novel. At the end, I've included an excerpt from my bestselling romantic comedy **A Place in the Sun**.

Fighting Words concludes at around 90% on your device.

Happy Reading!

XO, RS Grey

fighting WORDS

a standalone romantic comedy

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

R.S. GREY

CHAPTER 1

SUMMER

“THIS IS IT,” the British cabbie declares. “We’re here.”

No. That can’t be right.

I lean closer to the window, anxious to get a better view of the dilapidated stone building to my right—home sweet home for the next week or two.

Truthfully, dilapidated is too nice of a word to describe the place. Monstrously hideous? Beyond salvation? Legitimately haunted? A window on the ground floor has two shattered panes as if someone has thrown a rock through them. A chunk of the stone wall on the right has completely crumbled. Also the front door is wide open, swinging ominously.

“Bloody hell. Looks to be abandoned.” The driver turns back to me. “You sure you have the right address?”

I look down at the itinerary I created for myself then back up at the building.

“Yes. This is it. Crown House, says it right there on that sign.” The one hanging sideways off a single hinge, the painted black letters mostly flaked off so that instead of Crown House, it reads *Crow Ho s*.

We agree I should scope it out first before I bother retrieving my luggage from the trunk. As I walk up the short path to the front door, my boots crunch atop freshly fallen snow.

The sun has nearly set and I'm losing daylight by the second, which is annoying considering my original travel plan would have had me here hours ago. My flight landed in Leeds this afternoon, but I was delayed by a small luggage fiasco. A woman took my suitcase from the carousel, and when I tried to convince her of her mistake, she shouted for airport security. There was no confusion on my end. I've had the suitcase for over a decade, and it's on its last leg. The wheels only turn when they feel like it, and the handle is permanently jammed in place. Still, the woman clung to it like her life depended on it. I had three interviews with customs officials, one ID check, and a few passes through a metal detector before I got into a cab with *my* suitcase to make the journey north. Now, it's a little past 6:00 p.m. and *Crow Hos* is dark inside.

I stop at the front door and poke my head inside. "Hello?"

My voice echoes faintly off the stone walls. The place is empty. There's nothing inside except a few pieces of furniture cast off by a previous owner, maybe one who lived here in—and this is just a ballpark—the Paleolithic era.

Something suddenly moves to my right, and I jump a mile in the air before I realize it's just some rustling leaves. I try to laugh off the scare, but I still book it back to the cab like there's an angry ghost at my heels. I'm not someone to back down from a challenge, but there's obviously been some mistake. When InkWell coordinated my travel, they must not have realized Crown House is no longer in operation. That's fine. It's not like I'm alone in a foreign country with nowhere to go and no one to call as the sun sets. That would be...*bad*.

I reclaim the back seat and shut my door. "I can't stay here."

"Where to then?" he asks with a new layer of impatience in his tone. I'm suddenly not worth the trouble of the flat-rate fare from the train station.

I look at my itinerary, my last saving grace. Beneath my flight times and the Crown House address, I wrote directions to get to Nathaniel Foster's house from the train station. I was

planning to visit him first thing in the morning, during work hours, but I don't have a choice now.

My phone gets absolutely no service out here. Nathaniel will know what to do. He can suggest a place to stay or maybe even let me crash for a night and help me figure things out in the morning. Sure, there's the slight chance he won't be all that enthused when he sees me and realizes who I am...

The driver clears his throat, forcing my hand.

"Here," I say, passing him the paper. "Could you take me to that address, please?"

After a barely stifled sigh, he pulls out onto the main road. He has no trouble navigating the English countryside in the dark. At least one of us has a sense of direction. I'm all turned around; we left any sign of civilization a long time ago. Now I *think* we're in the Yorkshire Dales, a national park with thousands of square miles of moors, valleys, and hills...and as far as I can tell, absolutely *zero* Holiday Inns.

The snow is really coming down now. Even with the driver's headlights illuminating the road and his windshield wipers whipping back and forth at full steam, it's hard to tell when there's an upcoming curve or bend. I'm getting slung back and forth in the back seat like a pinball, but I don't complain because I've officially overstayed my welcome in this cab. The last thing I need him to do is kick me out prematurely. Fortunately, the turnoff for Nathaniel's house is only about ten minutes away from Crown House. It makes sense that the publisher would have booked my lodgings near him. I'll give them credit for that even if they dropped the ball on the place being habitable.

Nathaniel doesn't live directly off the main road. We bump along a narrow lane, sandwiched by moonlit fields and rolling hills until we finally reach a short wooden fence that surrounds a stone cottage worthy of Nancy Meyers herself. *What in the Hallmark Movie?*

There's a light dusting of snow covering the aged tile roof, puffs of smoke billow from a chimney, and a little wreath

hangs on the pale green front door. I've never seen a place so quaint and inviting.

Someone is definitely home. Warm light spills out of a first-floor window that frames a small living room where a dark red reading chair is angled toward a roaring fire. Steam curls up from a cup of tea sitting on a table beside the chair. Next to it, a paperback is resting with its pages face down. Someone is having a perfect evening. Nathaniel? Or a guest?

This time, the driver doesn't give me a chance to change my mind about my destination. He asks for payment immediately upon parking the cab then hops out and has my suitcase unloaded before I even have my feet planted on the snow. The trunk slams as I walk through a small gate toward the front door, and tires squeal as the vehicle peels away.

Right.

With nothing left to lose, I rap my fist against the door, just beneath the cheery wreath, and then I step back and try a smile on for size. Too wide seems slightly psychotic. Totally flat makes me look as annoyed and tired as I am. I settle for something in between by the time the door swings open and Nathaniel Foster fills the space on the other side.

I have to look up to see him properly. He's taller than I expected. Different in a thousand ways, actually. Those tiny photos on book jackets aren't to scale, and the author photo we have on file for him is old, taken years ago when he was still in his late twenties. The man in front of me is grizzly compared to the prim and proper writer I was expecting. Day-old stubble coats his jaw, his short honey-brown hair disheveled and messy. His eyes—the softest, most gentle blue color I've ever seen on a person—stare at me with confusion.

He takes me in then looks behind me, expecting to find a car, I'm sure. When his eyes land on me again, I feel their weight.

“Are you lost?” he asks, his voice full of concern.

It's absolutely ridiculous, but I suddenly regret not taking better stock of how I look before I knocked on his door. Is my

hair okay? I have it clipped half-up half-down with a barrette, but it's long and unruly at times. Now, it's likely covered with snow flurries. I'm wearing a pair of jeans that have been on my body for over twenty-four hours and my silly puffer jacket—the one I picked up because it was cute and cheap—is not nearly as warm as I need it to be. I shiver then fix my smile.

“Hi, I apologize for the late arrival. I'm Summer Collins.” I put my hand out for him to accept. “From InkWell.”

It's like I just performed an unintentional magic trick, that's how swiftly his expression tightens with annoyance. A snap of my fingers and he's a hardened man.

“I had planned to come tomorrow morning,” I continue with a hesitant tone, “but I got delayed at the airport. This woman tried to take my luggage and then the zipper finally busted on my suitcase and they had to help me tape it shut—”

He shakes his head. “What are you on about?”

His accent is mostly American, but I can hear traces of something distinctly British—no doubt a side effect of him having lived here for so many years.

I lift my hand a little higher, willing him to accept it. “Sorry. Long story. But like I said...I'm Summer Collins. *From InkWell.*”

His brows tug together. “What are you doing on my doorstep, *Summer Collins from InkWell?*”

I try not to bristle at the viciousness behind his words.

“It's a little complicated, actually. I-I'm here to work with you.” I point over my shoulder, in the general direction of where I think Crown House sits abandoned and derelict. “Only the thing is—”

He comes out of his surprised stupor in time to cut me off again. “*Work with me?*”

“On your manuscript.” My words come out squeaky high, like a mouse.

His clear blue eyes, the ones I thought were so gentle, now harden to ice. “You have to be kidding me. Do you people ever

listen?”

BOOM.

The door slams in my face, and I stand there blinking awkwardly, trying to wrap my head around the last few hours and how it’s possible I could have such insanely bad luck.

I turn back to look at the winding lane that leads back to the main road. It’s empty now, of course. No cab in sight.

Well that’s just great. What am I supposed to do?

I realize *now* as I stand on Nathaniel’s front stoop, stranded in the English countryside with no car, no cell reception, and no plan, that the situation is much more dire than InkWell let on. Our most beloved author—the man keeping the lights on at corporate—just might be past the point of saving.

There’s no denying Nathaniel is one of the most famous authors alive today. His science fiction series is wildly popular—beloved by loyal fans of the genre and new readers alike—but unfortunately, he’s blown his last three deadlines, and InkWell is more impatient than ever for his next manuscript. The release date for the final installment in the *Cosmos* trilogy has been pushed back twice, and there’s a very real fear that he’ll do what so many greats have done before him and leave the series unfinished forever.

I knew the situation was bad if InkWell was willing to send me across the pond. I’m the newest employee on the payroll—young, inexperienced, and the only one willing to play the role of sacrificial lamb.

I thought at worst, I’d fail and head home with my tail between my legs, and at best, I’d do the undoable: ease Nathaniel’s writer’s block, help him wrap up his award-winning trilogy, and return to America a national hero.

Turns out my worst-case scenario didn’t account for the harsh English winter. My *new* worst fears involve frostbite and a slow agonizing death.

Someone could have warned me that Nathaniel had gone full recluse. With his bad attitude and all that scruff, he’s

practically part werewolf. Who slams the door on someone like that?!

It's clear he wants nothing to do with me, and that's fine. I need a plan and I need it now. I'm still on his doorstep, hovering awkwardly. It's best that I go. Only...that damn cab is long gone by now, and my phone doesn't have service, and I can't quite remember which way I'm supposed to head on the main road. Did we come from the left or right?

Despite being unsure, I walk down to the short gate in front of the cottage. I'm prepared to trudge down the long path and wheel my crappy suitcase along the moonlit fields for as long as I need to until I find a solution to my problem.

Once I'm at the gate though, I can't make myself take another step. Self-preservation kicks in, and my feet stay rooted in place. There's no way I can leave here. I have no idea where to go. I want to turn back and ask Nathaniel for help, but I'm scared I'll get my head bitten off again. I try my phone then curse under my breath when the Maps app won't load.

I'm stuffing it back in my purse when I hear feet crunch in the snow behind me, and I turn to see Nathaniel coming out of his cottage, wrapped in a thick winter jacket, so much sturdier than my silly puffer. His long strides make it easy for him to reach me in no time, and then he's standing there, a brick wall between his cottage and me.

"What are you still doing on my property?" he demands rudely.

My jaw drops at his audacity, but I recover quickly. Does he have absolutely no compassion? No heart? "I'm *trying* to leave! My phone isn't working though. Can I borrow yours?"

It pains me to have to ask for help, especially from someone I'd like to tell off.

He shakes his head and stuffs his hands into his pockets. "No use. There's no service out here. At all."

I look up toward the night sky, talking to myself. "No service *at all!* *Awesome!*" Then I shake my head. My angry

gaze lands on him again. “Well which way is town?”

I’ve taken a page out of his book and dropped all semblance of manners.

He studies me, his eyes narrowing with judgment. Then he casually nods his chin to the left, wholly unbothered by my predicament. “Sedbergh is an hour’s walk that way.”

There’s not even a hint of remorse in his tone.

I look down at my suitcase with a searing glare. “You hear that, you stupid thing? An hour. I need you to stay together until then or so help me god—”

Without another word to Nathaniel, I push through the gate and take off down the snow-covered lane, stomping in the direction he told me to go and ignoring the fact that my fingers are already starting to go numb from the cold. I only get a few yards before my suitcase meets a boulder hidden beneath a layer of snow on the road and bursts open with gusto, spilling my clothes everywhere.

I stare down at it with a wobbling bottom lip.

“Christ,” Nathaniel hisses from behind me. “Just come inside, will you?”

After such a rough initial meeting, I’m not exactly excited to enter the dragon’s lair, but at least Nathaniel left the door open for me, even if he wasn’t kind enough to help me stuff my soggy clothes back into my broken suitcase. I barely manage to get it all inside, and when I do, I barrel past the front door with all the gentleness of a bull in a china shop. I splay my suitcase on the ground and garments tumble out of it. I’m huffing and puffing with annoyance, and I immediately start whipping off layers, boiling hot now that I’m inside.

Nathaniel has done the same, hanging his jacket neatly on a hook on the door in the kitchen. He’s in a knitted navy sweater and dark jeans. Once he toes off his boots, he’s left in gray wool socks. I don’t know why I soften at the sight of him.

This man has been nothing but cruel. It's his cottage, I think; it would soften anyone.

It's every bit as warm and welcoming as I'd hoped it would be when I first laid eyes on it. The space is small. The first floor only consists of a kitchen to the right of the entry and a sitting room on the left. Every spot has been put to good use though, filled with mismatched furniture and eclectic antiques, artwork, and books. *So* many books. They're everywhere, along the shelves that flank the fireplace and inside a glass-doored armoire tucked behind a set of upholstered chairs. The first floor is lit by lamp and firelight, and though there are wooden beams spanning the ceiling, the walls are made from blocks of limestone and mortar.

With the drapes and throw pillows, the layered rugs and framed art, the entire place is more feminine than it would be if Nathaniel lived here alone, which means any minute now, a woman is going to come down those stairs and berate Nathaniel for treating me so poorly. I can't wait to meet her. She'll offer me a warm cup of tea instead of standing there, glaring at me the way Nathaniel is right now.

It's clear that although he's invited me into his cottage, he has no intention of treating me like a welcome guest.

CHAPTER 2

NATE

I SETTLE my coat on the hook just as my new houseguest curses near the front door.

I have no idea what to make of her, *Summer Collins from InkWell*. She just arrived and already she's a nuisance. I was about to sit down with a fresh cup of tea and power through the last few chapters of *The Sound and the Fury* when she knocked on my door. Now, the tea's probably cold, and I can't remember what was happening in the book where I left off.

I've made myself perfectly clear to InkWell: I want to be left alone. After sending away Suzanne, Kent, and Noel, I'm shocked Summer had the courage to show up here at all. I wish I could say she's unannounced, but my publisher likely sent me an email warning me about her imminent arrival weeks ago and I just haven't got around to reading it.

Either way, she's not welcome here. I would march her out of my house right now, but the snow isn't letting up, and I'm not prepared to let her wander out into the night and freeze to death.

I turn toward the foyer to make sure Summer's shut the door, or maybe I just want a better look at her in the light. She's standing in the foyer, her lavender jacket in a heap on top of her broken suitcase and all her clothes spilling out onto the floor. There are jeans, long-sleeved shirts, a set of cherry red pajamas...a pale pink bra.

Sensing where my eyes have fallen, she scowls. "Here, just give me some duct tape. I'll fix it up and be on my way."

I sigh because I'm already light-years ahead of her. I know her circumstances are worse than she realizes, and I'm going to have to be the bearer of bad news.

I prop my hands on my hips. "I don't know what your plan is, but there's no one who can help you in Sedbergh. Where are you planning to stay?"

"I'm not sure yet," she says haughtily, undoubtedly sick of my judgmental stare. "The rental InkWell set up for me was not to my liking."

Not to her liking?

Oh Jesus...that means they tried to book Crown House again.

"I'll just find a hotel in Sedbergh," she says confidently.

I shake my head slowly, annoyed by her youth and all that shiny wonder in her eyes. "Not going to happen. It's off season—the town's shuttered for winter. You'll be directed on to Kendal or back down to Leeds, which is no use to you considering you have no car to get to either of those places."

It's obvious Summer doesn't belong here. Like a flower peeking through snow, this wintry landscape is all wrong for her. She should be in Los Angeles, driving a turquoise convertible to the beach. Her skin is freckled and flushed. Her hair is blonde with tinges of red; strawberry blonde is what they call that particular color. It's damp now, wet with melting snow, just like her shirt and her jeans and her flimsy shoes I can't help but sneer at. Where did she think she was going? Miami in May?

Now finally, she looks proportionately worried, as if the severity of her situation has finally sunk in for her. "So I can't leave even if I want to?"

I sigh, narrowing my gaze. "I wouldn't recommend it, no."

The color drains from her face. "Oh my god."

"This storm isn't so bad. In a few weeks, the snow will really kick in." I hold my hand at my hip to show her how high it got last year.

Her eyes widen. She releases a heavy exhale and looks down at the mess at her feet.

“So I can’t go into town and I can’t stay here...” she muses to herself, trying to work out a solution. She peers up at me from beneath her eyebrows. “Do you have any other buildings on the property? A barn or something?”

I almost smile at the question.

“No barn.”

I don’t ask her what she would have done if I’d said yes. Take her chances sleeping on hay? Unfortunately for the both of us, my cottage is all she has for the night.

“You can stay here and we’ll figure out a way to get you home in the morning.”

“Get me home?” Suddenly she has a backbone again. She sets her shoulders back and lifts her chin. “I’m not going home. I have a job to do.”

“Not with me you don’t. You can sleep up here.” I head for the stairs, assuming she’ll follow me.

She does, but she still has a little fight left in her. “I can’t just stay here with you. You’re a stranger.”

“Doesn’t look like you have a choice,” I call back as I stop on the second floor. “You came to me, remember? You could have stayed in the States where you belong.”

She starts to tentatively walk up the stairs. “I have a job to do.”

“*Had* a job.”

“I’m not leaving England.”

I groan under my breath and push open the door to my guest room. Well...room. It’s currently not fit for any guest except the tabby cat splayed out on the daybed against the far wall.

“You have a cat?” Summer asks from behind me.

Her tone implies shock. Why couldn’t I have a cat?

Apparently, she understands my question from the look I give her.

“You don’t seem like the type,” she notes, giving me a once-over like I’m the living embodiment of the devil.

“The cat isn’t mine.”

She frowns in confusion. Up close like this I can see her eyes are greenish brown, the color of moss and earth in a dense forest. A bit mysterious.

“Did you—did you *steal* it?” She looks horrified.

Good lord. I rub my forehead and ease the tension headache building there.

“There are always animals here,” I tell her. “That tabby cat.” I point to Cat and then throw my hand up. “A chicken. Every now and then, an old English sheepdog who’s not much use anymore will wander over from a nearby farm and sleep in front of my fireplace before he heads home.”

She frowns. “Don’t the owners come for them?”

“Surprisingly no. I once kept a sheep for two months before it wandered back home.”

“You *think* it wandered home. Maybe it got eaten by a coyote...” She looks worried at the thought.

“No coyotes here,” I say, exasperated. “Only foxes, and I prefer to imagine the fluffy thing returned to its family safe and sound.” I flip the light on in the room and the tabby stretches out over the quilt. “Anyway, you can sleep here for the night.”

“It’s a little cluttered.” Her gaze quickly cuts to me, and with a smile, she adds, “But it’s nice. Thank you. This will work great.”

“Right.” I point out in the hallway. “Bathroom’s in the center of the hall between the two bedrooms.” I’m already heading back toward the stairs. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Wait!” she says, alarmed.

I turn back over my shoulder to see her desperate grimace.

“I haven’t had dinner! And I could really use a hot shower. I’ve been traveling since yesterday...or was that the day before?” She shakes her head. “I don’t know, it’s been a long time and—”

“Fine. Shower and I’ll make you something to eat.”

Before she can come up with a protest, I start stomping down the stairs, anxious to get my hosting duties over with. When’s the last time I had someone in this house with me? Was it my dad last year?

I don’t care enough to be self-conscious about the place. Besides, I love this cottage with its eclectic furniture and lived-in charm. It’s home.

I check the cupboards in the kitchen first, wincing at how bare they are. I’d planned to make it to Kendal tomorrow or the next day for a big grocery haul. I hadn’t realized things were this bad.

I grab a box of crackers and then, in the refrigerator, I root through useless ingredients until I land on some goat cheese and jam. A jar of olives, some pickles—I grab it all. I set everything out on the counter and stare down at it like an idiot.

This is all the food I have to offer her?

If I’d known she was coming, I would have saved some of the pesto pasta I made for dinner, but that’s long gone, and I don’t have the ingredients to make more. I start layering cheese and crackers on the plate, though there’s no sense in making it look fancy. I’m not fooling anyone here.

I hear her up there, showering. While I had my head in the fridge, she came down for her things. I should have helped her carry it all up, but I’m being stubborn about her presence. My dad would give me an earful if he knew how I was treating this woman, but what am I supposed to do? She’s the enemy! I can’t be nice to her. I want her gone, immediately.

The shower cuts off, and I only now realize I didn’t give her a spare towel. She’ll have to use mine to dry off. Damn. I’m really failing at this.

A few minutes later, she pads down the stairs wearing the red pajamas I spied earlier. They look soft. White buttons run down the front, and the pants skim her bare feet. She needs socks. She'll be frozen over soon. Her hair is damp and brushed straight, but already the ends are starting to curl. Her face is fresh and clean now. It probably feels good to have showered after her long travel day.

I wet my bottom lip. "Sorry I didn't leave you a towel."

"I used yours," she says with pink cheeks. She can't look me in the eyes when she says it.

To be fair, the food is probably hard to look away from. It looks like a toddler has attempted to make an adult dinner. I've spread cheese and jam onto the crackers. The pickles and olives sit in a sad heap off to the left.

"Apologies."

"No." She shakes her head vehemently as she steps farther into the kitchen and smiles. "This is great. Girl dinner."

I have no idea what she's on about. "Girl dinner?"

She shrugs and laughs. "Yeah, like what women eat when their husbands aren't home and they can get away with eating whatever they want."

My frown says I'm no closer to understanding, so she gives up.

"I have wine," I say, like that might be the fix we need.

Her eyes light up. "I'd love some wine." Then she hurries to add, "But only if you were going to have some. Don't open it just for me."

I wasn't planning on having any tonight, but my tea is definitely cold by now and I don't care to make another cup. Wine it is.

I have a case of cabernet I bought when I was in France over the summer. I spent the month of May traveling through the country by train, stopping at vineyards, learning about the various regions, putting off the inevitable...

She watches me retrieve a bottle from a rack near the kitchen table. Neither of us says anything as I uncork it and spill heaping amounts into two glasses.

“Nice pour,” she says with a light laugh.

“Figured we might need it.”

Her finger brushes mine as she accepts the glass and then she nods toward the living room. “If I promise to be careful, could I take my food in there? That fire is calling my name.”

“You need socks and a sweater.”

She looks down at her bare feet like she’s embarrassed by them. “Yeah...mine got wet outside. Even the hems of my pajama pants are a little damp.”

Bloody hell. Of course, how could I forget that?

With a shake of my head, I rush off to the stairs, taking them two at a time. From the chest of drawers inside my room, I grab a thick pair of wool socks, and from my closet, I grab an old college sweatshirt.

Summer is curled up on my chair when I make it back downstairs.

My chair.

Half an hour ago, that would have been one misstep too far. I would have unceremoniously dumped her out of it onto the floor, but fortunately, I’ve regained my manners for the time being.

“Here.”

She looks up to see what I’m handing her, and I spot some jam on the left side of her lip. She’s eaten most of the crackers. She must have been really hungry.

“I can make more.”

Her cheeks redden again. “I should tell you no, but actually, I would love more. Thank you.”

In a weird way, it feels good to help her. Living on my own for so long, being wholly independent has made me forget the

value of doing things for other people.

I go back into the kitchen to prepare more of my weird “girl dinner” as she calls it and steal surreptitious glances at Summer while I do it. She’s from InkWell and I can’t forget that, but also, curled up like that, in my sweatshirt, she doesn’t look like the enemy anymore. The tabby cat has followed her downstairs, and when she thinks I’m not watching, she feeds it a little of her food.

“If you feed them, they’ll never leave,” I taunt, keeping my attention on the jam.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she says, covering her tracks. “Though I thought I saw some cat food in a bowl near the door...”

I clear my throat, choosing not to discuss that.

“Do you have a name for this cat that’s not yours?” she asks, leaning down to rub under his chin.

“Cat.”

I say it like it’s dumb she even had to ask. That’s Cat, and the others were Chicken and Sheep and Dog. They don’t get names—that’s a step too far. And if she asks me if I let Cat curl up at the end of my bed more nights than not, I’ll plead the fifth.

“And where is Mrs. Foster tonight?” Summer asks, stealing her attention away from Cat long enough to look up at me with raised brows.

I furrow mine. “My mom?”

She laughs. “No...sorry. I was trying to pry gently, but I guess I should just flat-out ask if you live with a woman.”

What part about me feeding her cheese, slightly stale crackers, and pickles for dinner made her believe there is a woman in the house? I only had one towel upstairs for crying out loud.

“No woman.”

“Oh.” She rears back, actually taken aback by this. Then she looks over the space with newfound interest.

Ah. So that’s why she asked.

“I bought this place from a widow who wanted to move to London to be closer to her children. She originally bought it from a couple a decade before that, and so on. I don’t think anyone ever purges before they leave. One person owns the cottage and fills it with their things, they pass it on, and the next person does the same.”

She smiles and nods her head toward the window. “I’m a little sad you didn’t have a hand in these floral drapes.”

I raise a taunting eyebrow. “Who says I didn’t?”

She laughs out loud, and the sound of it could lift me off the ground. Laughter like that—light and melodic—doesn’t happen often around here. At the pub where I spend a few nights a week, there are a lot of grunts and snorts, y’know, your standard guffaws and chuffs from the old-timers who come in for supper and a pint.

“You didn’t want to get rid of anything when the last person left?” she asks.

“I didn’t even think about it. Take that armoire for instance. It seems like it belongs there, no? More a part of the house than I am.”

She nods in agreement. “And the books? Were those left here too?”

I smile, proud. “Those are mine.”

I finish up in the kitchen and bring her a second helping. I’m being nicer to her than I have been to the other editors from InkWell, but I’ve never been able to turn away a stray, and now here she is, eating my food and wrapped in my clothes, curled up in my chair. In some ways, she’s no different than Cat or Dog or Chicken. I should call her Girl.

Tomorrow, I’ll figure out some way to get rid of her, but tonight I can be pleasant, right? I haven’t forgotten how to make polite conversation. I take my glass of wine and sit on

the loveseat across from her. It's not as comfortable as the chair, which is why I don't ever sit here.

"I like your soap," she tells me, a little timid as she points up. "The bar you had in the shower."

I can smell traces of it in the air. "A farmer's wife makes it for me out of honey and orange blossom. Maybe some vanilla, too." I can't remember exactly what she said the last combination was. "She switches her recipe up and every few months she'll leave me a couple of bars if I leave out some books for her to borrow."

Summer smiles at this simple arrangement as I take a long sip of wine. I don't mean to keep looking at her, and I shouldn't be studying her so intently. It's just, she's the nicest thing I've had to look at in a long time. It's been cold and drizzly here for a while, and now with the holidays over and the decorations all put away, we've entered the bleak part of winter, the rough bone-chilling months that eat away at you until you throw your hands up one day in mid-March and declare that you will never, ever, over-your-dead-body spend another winter here. You hover your mouse over one-way flights to Bora Bora or Cancun just as spring finally appears and you forget all about how much you hate it.

Summer is a spring flower come early.

The more her hair dries by the fire, the more it looks like fire itself.

"What?" she asks, batting at her face.

I shake my head. "Nothing. Jam."

"Here?" she asks, pointing to the side of her mouth.

It's perfectly clean, but I let her wipe it and nod as if she got something.

She sets her empty plate on the side table beside *The Sound and the Fury*. "So, it seems a little silly not to speak to you now, while I have your undivided attention..."

And like that, my somewhat pleasant evening goes up in smoke.

I down the rest of my wine then stand up to get more. “You should save your breath. It’s not worth trying to go down this road with me.”

Her brows furrow before I turn away completely. “I don’t think I understand. InkWell sent me here to do a job, and I’m eager to get started. If my late arrival tonight offended you, I really do apologize. That wasn’t my plan at all—”

I squeeze my eyes closed and try to swallow as much annoyance as I can. I don’t want to unintentionally offload everything onto Summer and then regret it in the morning.

“It has nothing to do with your arrival and nothing to do with *you* at all.” I bite the words out then turn around to face her. “Did InkWell tell you about the people they sent here before you?”

She frowns. “Noel? Yes...”

“And Kent? Suzanne?”

She blinks quickly as if trying to think fast. “I’m sure. Yes.” Then her voice falters. “Do we even have a *Suzanne*?”

I ignore her question and trudge on as I pour more wine, needing to get this out. “Three editors have arrived here on my doorstep with various grand plans to get me back on track to cross the finish line, but I refused to work with them and you’ll be no different.”

“*Why?*”

“Why what?”

“Why are you so against the creative process?”

“I’m not.” I say the words through clenched teeth.

She doesn’t falter. She *still* doesn’t get it. “It’s obvious you might need some help—”

“*NOT from you!*” The words burst out of me like a clap of thunder, and I immediately regret them, even more so when she flinches and drops her eyes as if I’ve scared her.

Christ.

I dump my untouched second glass of wine down the sink, set the glass on the counter, and head for the stairs. I'll put the fire out later. Right now, I want to be done with this conversation and done with her.

“There's a spare blanket there if you need to take it to bed. It gets cold at night. I'll get you to the train in the morning.”

“But—”

“Good night, Summer.”

I'm almost to the top of the stairs before she replies sullenly. “Good night.”

CHAPTER 3

SUMMER

NATHANIEL WASN'T KIDDING about the cold. A cottage like this doesn't come equipped with central heat. It's the dead of night and I'm lying on the daybed in the guest bedroom upstairs, still wearing Nathaniel's sweatshirt and socks. I have three blankets wrapped around me and Cat at my feet, acting like a tiny furnace.

I can't sleep, but it's not from the chill. I have no idea what time it is. My phone's charging across the room, and I don't want to leave my cocoon of warmth to check it. It has to be late though. I stayed awake downstairs a while after Nathaniel went up. Part of me wanted to finish my wine; it was delicious and I would have gladly accepted the glass Nathaniel poured down the drain in his rush to get away from me—a *pity*. But I also lingered down there because I appreciated the peace and quiet in front of the roaring fire. I love this cottage. If I had money to spare, I would gladly take a vacation somewhere just like this. I can picture it perfectly. I'd do nothing but read for days on end. My only worry would be running low on the cheese Nathaniel fed me or on firewood.

It would be a far cry from the vacations I'm used to, the ones I went on as a kid with my family. To call them vacations is laughable. They were excursions, treks, life-changing experiences for which it was absolutely required to come equipped with bug repellent, bear spray, hydration tablets, blister cushions, and ankle wraps. It was not about fun. My parents and my siblings would have laughed if I'd argued that vacations are meant to be relaxing.

The worst ones—the ones that make me wince just thinking about them—include a five-day hike through Big Bend National Park in the heat of summer, a primitive elk hunt in Montana where we had to forage for our own food and mostly lived off of berries and nuts, and a never-ending sailing trip where I was expected to push through my intense bout of sea sickness to help the crew, I don't know, cast lines and whatnot.

My entire family *loves* stuff like that, but it's not all that surprising. They're extreme people, all of them. Let's start with their jobs for instance. They're all in healthcare, and not the 9-to-5 kind either. Both of my parents are pediatric trauma surgeons, my brother Ben is an emergency medicine doctor, and my sister Emma is an obstetrician.

My dad has completed the New York Marathon five times. My mom has taught herself the perfect art of French cooking and is an award-winning sommelier. Ben founded a healthcare non-profit and spends part of every year bringing low-cost health services to underserved communities around the country. Emma has three blond children!

I'm the blackest of the black sheep, the baby of the family people just sort of forget about.

"Ben and Emma really take after the two of you," some distant relative said to my parents at a recent wedding. "You really lucked out with them."

I wanted to wave my hand and say, *Hey, remember me? I exist too.*

My family wouldn't know what to do with themselves in this cottage.

"Is there a leak somewhere I could fix?" my dad would wonder. "You know what? These door hinges need lubricant."

"Let me get these books organized," my mother would suggest.

They wouldn't understand the magic of a place like this, the same way they don't understand me.

I roll over and turn on my side. Cat meows like he's pissed I woke him up, as if he hasn't slept soundlessly through the night.

None of my family knows I'm here right now. Last month, I told them about my new job at InkWell via group text, and the silence that followed for the next eight hours made me want to shove my phone down the disposal. I knew Emma wasn't going to respond. But finally, my brother chimed in to save me from complete embarrassment.

Ben: Great, Summer. Very exciting.

Then my dad broke rank.

Dad: I didn't realize you were looking for a position like this. Developmental editor? What is your benefits package? Did you negotiate your salary? What's the next step? Call me.

I didn't call him because I'm a bad daughter and I already know that, so why bother hearing it repeated to me over the phone?

My mom, at least, admonished me via side text, a courtesy I appreciated.

Mom: This job is fine for now, Summer, but where do you see yourself in five years?

Five years? I don't even know where I'll be in five *minutes*.

I've just finished graduate school and I landed a coveted position at InkWell. I'm doing everything right, only because I'm not a type-A whiz kid, I feel like a failure.

For once, I would love my family to take me seriously, to appreciate my differences and celebrate my quirks. I don't have to be married to medicine to be a productive member of society. *Literature matters!* I was never moved in a meaningful way after completing one of those dreaded hikes with my family, but as a middle schooler I was brought to tears by *Bridge to Terabithia*. I walked around for a year, recommending *All The Light We Cannot See* to anyone with a pulse because it seared itself onto my soul. Try to tell me *To*

Kill a Mockingbird isn't one of the most important pieces of writing anyone's ever accomplished.

My family knows who Nathaniel Foster is. Though none of them has very much time for reading—and if they do, they certainly don't pick up “fluff”—every one of them has read the first two books in Nathaniel's *Cosmos* trilogy. I gave book one, *The Last Exodus*, to my dad for Christmas years ago, and he finished it in one day.

If I'm somehow able to do what I've set out to accomplish here—help Nathaniel, give him meaningful editorial feedback, and bring *Cosmos* book three to market—I know my family will understand the significance. I know they will see me through a new lens.

Nathaniel wants me gone. Wine and cheese aside, he's made that abundantly clear, but I have everything riding on this, so in the morning, I will try yet again to convince him to let me stay on here in England.

It won't be easy, but it's worth a shot.

CHAPTER 4

NATE

THIS MORNING I feel as hopeless as I've felt for as many mornings as I can remember. I didn't sleep well last night, and as I push up off my bed and stretch my back, I'm reminded of the houseguest just down the hall. I want to shower, but I don't want to wake her. It's ungodly early and she probably had a restless night, in a new place with an angry man just two doors down.

There are bookshelves spanning one of my bedroom walls, filled with various foreign editions of my books *The Last Exodus* and *Echo of Hope*. French and German copies, Korean, Hungarian, Polish—I've lost count of how many translations were made, but the books have spanned the farthest reaches of the earth. My last book tour took me all the way to Thailand. I stood at a table, smiling in front of a crowd of rabid readers. The question on everybody's lips was the same as it is in every country: "When can we expect book three?!"

I can't look at the bookshelf as I pad quietly out into the hall to use the bathroom. I'll save the shower for later. I want to head into town and pick up some provisions—I can't cobble together a breakfast like I cobbled together a dinner. I doubt Summer would go for *another* round of cheese and crackers.

I have a car here, but it's a hunk of junk. I keep it for days like this, when there's so much snow piled on the ground I doubt my bike would make it very far. I don't even expect it to start, and it sput-sput-sputters as I crank the key before finally

rumbling to life. I pat the dashboard like I'm patting a loyal pet then set out for Sedbergh.

If I want to do a big grocery haul, I have to drive all the way to Kendal. For times like this though, where I can get by on the essentials, the grocery store on Main Street is fine. I skip past the British fare like baked beans and black pudding and instead grab some cereal, milk, eggs, bacon, English muffins, fresh coffee, and orange juice. Martin is manning the counter with one eye glued to the television propped on the counter. It's a rerun of a football game, and I assume it's Kendal Town F.C. until I hear the announcer mention Ferguson.

"Man United up?" I ask, grabbing a few pounds out of my wallet.

Martin grumbles as he rings up my items. "Not until later. Scholes scores against Barcelona in the last few minutes. I still remember losing my voice during this game. Got company?"

I don't usually get this much food when I come in.

"Something like that."

He nods but doesn't ask me anything else. I'm sure gossip will spread. Sedbergh is a small sleepy town, but everyone knows each other, and everyone knows of me, the famous American.

People mostly keep to themselves around here though. I know Martin spends his days running this shop. Occasionally, he'll go down to the Red Lion for supper with his wife. I see him there sometimes, and we get on. It's nice. No one really bothers me about work. Everyone's just happy to argue about football and rugby over a pint.

Usually I would stay here and chat with him for a bit, but today, I'm in a rush to get back before Summer wakes up. I don't want her thinking I abandoned her. I still have one more task though. When I'm back in my car, provisions sitting in bags on the passenger side floorboard, I call my agent.

Main Street is about the only place with reliable cell service in Sedbergh, and I have to take full advantage, even if

that means waking Patrick up in the middle of the night.

Like the dutiful agent he is, he answers quickly. “Nate—” He clears his throat, trying to sound like I didn’t just pull him out of a dream. “Thanks for returning my call.”

“Sorry about the hour.”

I hear him sigh, and then there’s a pause, sheets rustle, and a door closes quietly. He’s married and likely doesn’t want to disturb his partner.

“No problem. Listen, I was getting worried. I’ve been trying to reach you for weeks now.”

“I’ve been busy.”

I wait for him to call me out for the lie, but he doesn’t. Patrick is likely picking his battles with me these days.

I have to be his most difficult client. I’m impossible to reach, for one. For two, I’ve forced him into playing middleman between InkWell and me, a position no one would covet at this point. If it weren’t for the money, he would have pushed me out of his agency a long time ago.

“As you know, Nate, InkWell has been lenient with you. With *us*,” he amends, linking us as a team, likely so I don’t go on the defensive. “However, they made it clear to me in our last meeting that they’ve reached the end of their rope.”

“Is that why they sent Summer?”

“So she arrived?”

“Last night.”

Patrick sighs. “What do you think of her?”

The question feels loaded in a way he didn’t intend. I recall the image of Summer sitting curled up on my chair in front of the fire last night. What I think of her—the honest truth—feels inappropriate.

I refocus on what’s important. “I won’t work with her. I’ve told you I’m uninterested in teaming up with someone on this.”

Patrick sighs, and then there's a tense silence. I brace myself for what's to come, suspecting the worst even before Patrick speaks with a somber tone.

"The contract with HBO fell through."

It's like he's just laid a bomb at my feet.

"Dan sent word last week," he continues. "They were tired of waiting to see if you were going to finish the series before filming."

I wince and then wipe my hand down my face, scrubbing my jaw.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Inwardly, this news resonates on every level. On the outside, I try to keep it together.

"Okay."

I won't apologize even though I know that deal likely lost Patrick a good bit of money.

"We promised to deliver the third book to InkWell *a year and a half ago*," Patrick stresses. "The fans are—"

"I don't want to hear it," I snap.

He thinks I don't know how angry they are? There are hundreds of pages of Reddit forums dedicated to tearing me apart. My readers feel entitled to the third book and they do deserve it, but thinking about it doesn't help me. The weight on my shoulders is crippling, more and more so each day. Another day without any written words is another day I'm failing myself and everyone else. No pressure, right?

"Right well, Nate, I'll be honest with you. InkWell has tried to be understanding, but they've made themselves perfectly clear." His tone hardens with his next words. "Work with Summer."

"Or what?"

Patrick groans, sounding tired. "You already know. You pay back the advance, public apology, ridicule—the worst happens, okay? But let's not go there. There's no need to

tarnish our relationship with InkWell permanently. They've been good to you over the years. Just get that manuscript in tip-top shape and everything will get resolved."

CHAPTER 5

SUMMER

WHEN NATHANIEL RETURNS to the cottage, groceries in hand, I'm sitting on the edge of the sofa, holding a plastic bag filled with letters. He kicks the door closed with his foot and looks over to me. Relief—or what I think could be relief—flits across his face for only a moment before he turns away. He has two or three bags loaded up, enough that I want to rush over to help him, but I know he wouldn't accept it.

Nathaniel drops the grocery bags onto the kitchen table, and I look at the room with renewed attention. I *love* the kitchen, especially now in the light of day. It's a tidy square absolutely brimming over with charm and character. On the far wall that faces the living room, a large stone fireplace is topped by two long open shelves. Beside it, there's the oven and a window that looks out onto the snow-capped hills. The cabinets are painted a pale blue-gray color that contrasts nicely with the stone walls and the dark wooden beams on the ceiling.

There's a lot tucked into the space, but everything has its designated spot. Copper pots hang off the wall, in a line beside the window. On the open wooden shelves above the fireplace sit mismatched pottery and plates, a lamp, and beautiful antique china that likely never gets put to use. In the center of the kitchen, a round wooden table is topped with an empty fruit bowl. That's where Nate unloads his groceries while I watch.

Today, he's wearing jeans and a long-sleeved shirt that rides up to reveal a sliver of his back—toned and muscular—

when he hangs his coat on the kitchen door. I look away with wide eyes, like I've just seen something X-rated.

Nathaniel hasn't actually greeted me yet, and now I feel silly being the first one to say something. I hate being an unwanted houseguest. First thing this morning, I made my bed and collected my things...well *tried* to collect my things. I flung my clothes around my room last night hoping they'd dry, but with it being so cold, most of them were still damp by the time I woke up this morning. Even still, I stuffed everything back into my suitcase and lugged it all downstairs. Now, it sits in a heap by the door.

I stand and edge closer to the kitchen while maintaining a healthy distance. I don't want Nathaniel thinking I'm trying to get comfortable here. He's made himself clear: I don't belong.

"You have a car."

He unloads cereal and muffins from the first bag without looking up. "If you want to call it that. It barely runs."

"You could have driven me somewhere last night," I point out.

I didn't think that was an option. I could have been out of here already, out of his hair and back in the company of people who don't hate me for merely existing.

"Not during the storm."

There's only a few feet of snow on the ground. It doesn't seem so bad, but who am I to argue? I don't know what it's like to drive out here. "Right. I forgot."

"And like I said." He flings the refrigerator door open so he can put away his milk and orange juice. "There's no place for you to stay this time of year."

"What about over in Kendal?"

He doesn't reply.

I pinch my eyes closed for a moment and try to regain some courage. I knew it wouldn't be easy to face him again this morning. He's intimidating, enigmatic...handsome, *unfortunately*, despite the bad attitude. His caramel brown

shirt matches his hair. The short strands are unruly this morning—slightly wavy—but men pay stylists good money for that exact look. I bet if I told him that, he'd roll his eyes. I can't imagine he goes in for haircuts very often. More like he grabs clipping shears and does it himself whenever it gets too long to manage. His jaw is still covered in scruff.

I heard him get out of bed and dress this morning. I heard him leave the cottage, and I've been waiting anxiously for him to return. Now, I know we're going to have an uncomfortable confrontation, and I'm just trying to brace for it as best I can.

"You don't need to worry. I'm going to leave just as soon as it's possible. Without cell service, I have no way of calling a cab, and I didn't want to start walking until you gave me directions."

He keeps unloading groceries while I talk, refusing to look at me. Then he reaches for a cast iron skillet from the open shelf and sets it down hard on the stove. I startle at the sound, but with his back turned, he doesn't see my reaction.

"But, just so you know." I step forward again so I'm finally at the entrance to the kitchen, a large opening supported by ancient wooden beams. "I'm not leaving England. I came prepared to do my job, and I think if you'd hear me out, you would see that I can be really helpful to you." I hold up a gallon-sized Ziploc bag, filled with so many letters I could barely get it zipped. "I brought you some fan mail—"

"Burn it," he says, point-blank, as he starts laying bacon down in the skillet.

"Are we that low on firewood?" I quip.

My teasing falls on deaf ears. I hate this! I'm trying my hardest here, and he couldn't care less. He's so selfishly wrapped up in his own world he doesn't understand how this affects me. My job is on the line here, my future, my success. I open the bag and pull out the first letter. I've read them all. We get thousands sent to InkWell every year. Jaclyn down in reception is responsible for filtering through them.

"Dear Nathaniel Foster, I hope this letter finds you well."

I look up just as Nathaniel's shoulders tense, but he doesn't say a word or turn around. Clearly this letter does not find him well. Still, I continue.

“My name is Franklin Wynne and I live in Phoenix, Arizona, with my wife. She was diagnosed with glioblastoma multiforme last year, and our entire world flipped upside down overnight. I'm happy to help take care of her, but I'd be lying if I said it wasn't isolating. I thought our lives would look much different than they currently do. I had hoped...well, I had hoped for a lot more. Maybe you'll find us in a different spot in a few years, my wife healthy and happy, but for now, I'm by her side day in and day out, taking her to doctor's appointments and treatments. I'm helping her endure something I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy.

I'm writing to you because of how impactful your books have been on my life. You might think I'm exaggerating when I say your stories, especially The Last Exodus, got me through some of the darkest days—”

The letter is suddenly wrenched out of my hand as Nathaniel steals it from me, tearing it in two, and then in four, again and again, until it's nothing but bits of confetti getting pushed down into the trash can beside the kitchen counter.

I'm too stunned to speak.

He's breathing hard as he leans over the top of the bin, trying to compose himself. His hands are squeezing the edge of the counter. His head hangs between his arms. I can see the muscles in his biceps ripple and bunch beneath his shirt, his chest rising and falling.

I've struck a nerve I never meant to touch, never even meant to *skim*.

“I-I'm sorry,” I stammer, unsure of where I've gone wrong.

He squeezes his eyes closed.

The silence seems to go on forever before he says with a defeated voice, “It's hard enough.”

That's all the explanation he gives.

“I didn’t realize.”

He shakes his head. “When I first started to write, I did it solely for myself. It was a complete secret I kept from everyone in my life.” He pushes off the counter and looks over at me, his pale blue eyes so painfully expressive. “Now, I write to meet the expectations of millions of people I don’t even know, people I have never and *will* never meet. They want so much from me... It’s paralyzing.”

My lips part but I don’t have any idea what to say. I didn’t understand the circumstances surrounding his publishing delays. Maybe it’s been a common discussion around the office, but I’m new and I assumed it was different. There was a chance Nate was just being a bit lazy about the whole thing. It’s not out of the question for authors to garner a little success, tuck away a bit of money, and then leave writing behind altogether. That celebrity status can do a number on the most innocent soul, and Nathaniel’s success has been on another level entirely. I made a mistake assuming things about him, and I feel bad for exacerbating the problem.

“I’ll get rid of the rest.” I tuck the bag of fan mail behind my back, like I’m scared of what he’ll do if he realizes I have more.

He nods, a little dazed, as if surprised he spoke about the trouble he’s having. Then he returns to the pan where the bacon has started to sizzle. Already, the cottage smells amazing, and despite the drama of the last few minutes, my appetite is alive and well. My stomach grumbles loud enough for Nathaniel to hear.

“How do you like your eggs?” he asks, keeping his back to me.

Clearly, he wants to move on, and that’s fine with me.

“Over medium, please.” I wait for him to turn around, but when he doesn’t, I speak to the back of his head. “I really am sorry.”

He gives me an infinitesimal nod to show that he’s heard me.

My suitcase is sitting by the door, so I stash the bag of fan mail in there. I really need to get some kind of tape to help with the broken zipper, but I don't want to be a nuisance to Nathaniel right now. I need to pick my battles, and repairing my suitcase isn't at the top of the list.

In normal circumstances, I wouldn't keep pressing on a wound, but the whole reason I'm in England, my entire job, hinges on Nathaniel accepting me as a developmental editor, a partner in the plotting process, an ally and teammate. Normally, a job wouldn't be this invasive. An author would submit a manuscript by email, I'd read through it a few times during the editorial process, give feedback and suggestions, and we'd polish it up all from the comfort of our respective desks. But this situation is unique. Nathaniel is the most important author we have on our roster, and I cannot accept his unwillingness to work with me as the final word. I have to keep pushing, as painful and awkward as it might be.

"Do you always eat a big breakfast?" I ask, trying to get us back to a more neutral topic.

"No, normally I just have toast and coffee. Oh—" The word reminds him that we don't have any yet.

On the small wheeled wooden island, nestled in the corner of the kitchen opposite the fireplace, there's a full-on coffee station with a French press, espresso machine, coffee pot, and milk frother. This man clearly takes his caffeine needs seriously.

"Why don't I make the coffee?" I suggest helpfully.

He's trying to get some coffee beans out of the grocery bags while simultaneously keeping watch of the bacon. It's almost done, and I can tell he doesn't want it to burn.

"It's fine." He ignores my suggestion, but I can't just stand here while he does it all.

I skirt around the kitchen table and politely but assertively try to take the beans out of his hand. "I worked as a barista for a year when I was in undergrad. It was at this local coffee shop right by the NYU campus."

He looks down at me, his gaze locking with mine, and the moment passes where he should let go of the bag of coffee beans, but he doesn't. We're both tugging gently.

I laugh lightly. Is it really so hard to let someone in? To have someone else make him a damn cup of coffee?

"I promise I won't screw it up. I was *very* good at my job," I promise with a sly smile.

He gets a little crease between his eyebrows, and for a second I think he's really going to fight me on this small thing. Then, like it's taking his full strength, he sighs deeply and relinquishes the bag.

"You can imagine how picky New Yorkers are about their coffee," I continue as I get to work.

"I know," he huffs. "I was one of them."

"Were you?" I can't help but jump on this bit of personal information.

"I lived there for years. After failing out of my PhD program."

"You *failed*? I don't believe it."

He shrugs. "It's true. That's what happens when you write a book instead of working on your thesis."

That's right. I recall that from his author bio. He started writing *The Last Exodus* while he was still at MIT. That fun fact is the beginning and *end* of the information he allows InkWell to share about him, and our marketing team had to push him to get that much. I understand why they add that little detail in the back of his books. It lends legitimacy to his work as a science fiction writer, makes him seem all the more cerebral and smart. It's what the genre demands.

"French press or drip?"

He points toward the coffee pot. "Drip is fine. I bought that French press at a market in Marseille a year ago and never use it. I can't get the proportions right or something."

I get busy with the coffee.

“You already had some beans by the way.” I hold up the half-used bag that was sitting by the coffee machine.

He doesn’t look at me when he replies. “I know. I just... wanted to try something new.”

“Roger that.”

I push aside the old bag and grab the one he picked up today. It’s fancier than what he had been drinking and claims to be a local “artisanal” blend.

“So how did that all work out? Were you published by the time you left MIT?”

He snorts like the question’s laughable. “No. As a student, I was dirt poor and drowning in loans, writing at night and generally confused about what I wanted out of life.” He unloads the bacon onto a plate layered with a few napkins to help soak up the grease. I want to steal a piece now while it’s piping hot, but I know it’d scald my mouth. “It wasn’t until my supervising professor sat me down and threatened to cut me from the program that I actually got the nerve to leave on my own. I worked on *The Last Exodus* for another two years, living in a shitty apartment and working odd jobs to pay the bills.”

“God, I can imagine what those loans looked like from MIT. You must have been worried.”

He puffs out a breath like it’s still painful to think about.

“Things worked out though. I signed with a good agent and he got me the deal with InkWell.”

“You make it all sound so simple.”

He shrugs. “Looking back, it was simple.”

My jaw drops as I turn to him. “The fact that you think writing *The Last Exodus* was simple is actually astounding to me. *That book*...it just—”

He looks over at me, and I can feel the blush creeping up my cheeks. His eyes narrow in curiosity as I offer up a part-smile part-grimace.

“I’m a fan...by the way.” I say it like I’m admitting something embarrassing.

He nods, but he doesn’t expound on the subject. Clearly, he isn’t comfortable with his position in life. Being universally adored and fawned over seems to unsettle him.

I return to my coffee duty. Underneath the island’s wooden countertop, there’s a metal shelf housing a mismatched array of mugs that look like they’ve been curated by all the past inhabitants of the cottage. One celebrates the golden jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. Another proclaims the drinker a Gryffindor. One crowded in the back has an illustration of two kittens playing with a basket of yarn.

I laugh in delight as I hold it up. “My grandmother has this mug!”

Nathaniel looks over at me, his expression softer now than it has been all morning. “You have to use it then.”

“Alright. Do you have a favorite?”

“That green one up front.”

It’s oversized and was likely handmade in a potter’s workshop. It’s painted with a dark green glaze that seems to melt down the sides. Of the bunch, it’d be my favorite mug too.

Once the eggs are done, we have ourselves a perfect breakfast. I’ve tasted the coffee so I know it’s good, but I still hold my breath waiting for Nathaniel to take his first sip. I’m across from him at the table, sitting with a tense posture. Nothing about this is easy.

This kitchen feels too small for him. I suspect even an airplane hangar would feel too small for him. I wonder if he would have this effect on me in a crowded room or if it’s simply because we’re here, alone, that he has me slightly uneasy.

He swallows, and his Adam’s apple bobs, the muscles in his jaw and throat capturing my attention. I’m probably watching him too intently, but I can’t help it. He’s nice to look at. I’ve never really been into men like him. He’s a far cry

from Andrew, my on-again, off-again boyfriend of the last few years. Andrew is an investment banker and someone my parents love. I know because they've made their opinions very much known. They like what Andrew can offer me: stability and security. He has an analytical brain and fits in nicely around the Thanksgiving dinner table. Just one more Collins, really. He's a little taller than me and lanky—no time to work out when you're watching the markets 24/7—but he pulls off the look well, dressing in nice clothes and cute glasses. I really, *really* like Andrew. He's been a solid foundation on which to build my life for the last few years, and he's been patient with me beyond belief. He's a catch! I know he could find someone else in a heartbeat, but he's held out for me.

Our relationship has never really been simple, and I'm the one to blame for that. Andrew's made it clear that he's always been all in on us. I'm the one who's unsure. I'm the one who's always wanted to take things slow, to pull back and hold off on getting too serious. We broke up the first time just before I started grad school. My fault, of course. We didn't talk for three months and then one day, he called me and asked me to get dinner, and I was struggling at the time, lonely and drowning in schoolwork. Andrew was a much-needed comfort, a teddy bear I continue to reach for time and time again.

Our second and most recent breakup happened a few months ago. He asked me to move in with him, I said I wasn't ready, and Andrew—angry and sad that I continued to thwart the forward progress of our relationship—put his foot down and said he wanted us to go on a break.

I feel guilt over my inability to commit to him, but I'm still hopeful that someday things will just click for us, that I'll wake up and love him the way I know I should.

Nathaniel seems like the exact opposite of Andrew, physically, at least. Where Andrew is khakis and a neat haircut, Nathaniel is worn blue jeans and a scruffy jaw. Nathaniel, generally, seems like one of the most romantic men I've ever met in real life, like his artistic soul lives right on the surface. He's tall and broad-shouldered, but he's gentle about

his size, like he knows it might intimidate me and he's trying to lessen the effect. He looks up and his bluer than blue eyes catch mine, and though my stomach squeezes tight, I force a smile.

“Good?” I prompt, nodding toward the coffee.

“Brilliant.”

My smile spreads into a real grin. I'm happy to have done one thing right around here. I've been a nuisance since my arrival. I tried to clean up the kitchen last night before I went to bed, and I'll be sure to clean up breakfast since he did most of the heavy lifting this morning. He didn't have to go get groceries. It must have been freezing cold out. He said he prefers toast and coffee and I see a full loaf of bread on the counter, so I know he went through the trouble just for me.

Now comes the hard part.

I have to break the peace.

I've inhaled my bacon and eggs so fast I've probably alarmed him, but I couldn't pace myself. It was really good. The bacon was crispy and perfectly cooked, the eggs weren't too runny. I complimented his cooking, but I can't keep putting off the inevitable. This is not a pleasant breakfast with a gorgeous man in the English countryside. I'm here for work.

I set my mug down after stealing one last heavy sip.

“Nathaniel—”

“Nate,” he interrupts, his eyes cutting up to look at me. Each time he does, my stomach pinches tight.

“*Nate*,” I amend. “I'm beginning to understand now, I think. The pressure you must be feeling is impossible.”

He sits back in his chair and wipes his mouth with a napkin. I look down at my plate, giving him a moment to adjust to the subject change, but he goes so long without saying anything that I'm forced to look up again. He's been assessing me with a sharp expression. If I thought he looked soft or kind when I noticed the kitten mug, that's completely gone now. From this distance, his blue eyes feel like a weapon.

“I’ve made up my mind. You’ll stay here.”

He says it like it’s a foregone conclusion.

“*I’ll stay here?*” I toss back at him for clarity. What is he talking about? “Is the snow that bad?” I turn to look out the window. I mean sure there’s a lot, but can’t he get me to a train or something? He managed to get to the store this morning.

He doesn’t look amused. “It’s not the weather. Are you here to do a job or not?”

I’m having a hard time keeping up. Last night, he seemed adamant that he wanted me gone. This morning as well.

“You’re going to let me help you? *Since when?*”

“Since I decided.”

I rear back, thinking fast, trying to connect pieces of the mystery. I was preparing for a fight. I thought I was really going to have my work cut out for me here and now suddenly he’s being accommodating? “This makes no sense. No offense—and I mean this as politely as possible—but it’s very obvious that you want nothing to do with me.”

“I’ll work on that,” he says, not the least bit bothered as he scoots back from the table to get another helping of bacon. “Take the room you stayed in last night.”

“The room I…” I let the words trail off like I can’t wrap my head around them.

He’s really inviting me to stay.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMER

FROM MY SECOND-STORY WINDOW, I watch Nate chopping wood near a shed at the back of his property. I've never actually seen someone chop wood in real life. On a TV show, sure, but in real life my lumber needs are taken care of sans axe. In fact, I've never even lived somewhere as an adult that had a wood-burning fireplace. My last apartment in New York City—part of Columbia graduate housing—came equipped with a shitty furnace I had to harass to get to work properly. I swear every time I was at my wit's end with it, annoyed enough to scream, it'd get its act together before I had to call maintenance.

Nate is a pro. Clearly, he does this a lot. It explains the muscles.

He lugs pre-cut logs of all shapes and sizes out of a small shed. He drops them onto a wide stump, swirls the axe behind his back and up over his head, and then with a *slam*, he brings the axe down hard, splitting the wood into clean pieces he can stack on a nearby tarp.

I probably shouldn't be watching him. How would I feel if he were watching *me* right now? Without my knowledge?

Honestly, the thought is kind of hot.

How pathetic am I?! It's taken me less than twenty-four hours to realize I'm attracted to Nate. Already, it's out of my hands. I'm kind of...shocked and, to be honest, feeling a little guilty about it. Where was this feeling with Andrew? Or any

of the other men who've come in and out of my life over the last decade?!

Crushes don't come easy for me. They never have. I remember my friends running around recess, taunting the boys they thought were cute. Meanwhile, I was playing soccer, trying to perfect my corner kicks. It didn't even occur to me that I should lay claim to a boy in my grade like everyone else was doing. When I was slightly older, it made me feel like the odd one out when my friends would prank-call boys at sleepovers. The phone would circle around to me and I'd stare at it like, *Now what?* Not having a boy's name and number locked and loaded meant I got pushed into calling someone *they* thought I liked.

My general disinterest and pessimism surrounding dating was always a topic of conversation with friends in college. The people in my life have psychoanalyzed me to death.

Your standards are too high.

You're too picky.

You have to be open to someone new and different.

Andrew was a setup orchestrated by Emma and another example of those close to me playing matchmaker. I resisted the blind date at first, but it didn't take me long to cave. At the time, when I met Andrew, I thought everyone else was right about me. More and more, it felt like I was the broken thing. After all, they all seemed to have no problem falling in love.

Looking back, I'm glad I went on that blind date. I really care about Andrew and I'm not willing to give up on us just yet. He's a good man and someone I'd be lucky to have by my side. But now, looking at Nate, there's an inexplicable feeling in my stomach, this ache.

If Nate were a man I bumped into in a coffee shop, a random stranger on the subway, a friend of a friend, I know with certainty I would sit up and take notice. I'd find a way to start a conversation with him. *Have you been here before? What's good? Do you have the time?* I'd figure out a subtle

way to flirt, to let him know I'm interested. Maybe I'd even be bold enough to slip him my number.

The realization sends a flutter of excitement through me. *Real butterflies*—the kind I've never felt.

Of course, it's mildly distressing that I'm having these feelings now, about *this* man, but I'm not going to overanalyze it. It's not like I'm going to do anything about it! It's just reassuring to know I'm not cold and dead inside. *I too can feel things!* I'm half-tempted to get all my old friends on the phone just to tell them, *Ha! See?!*

Nate stacks a few more freshly cut pieces of firewood onto the tarp, then he looks up in the direction of my window. I flinch and move away, turning and stumbling and landing awkwardly on the daybed. It's silly and I'm blushing, but who cares! Having a crush feels fun and harmless.

It doesn't change anything. I'm still hopeful I can figure things out with Andrew. He and I will end up together. Somehow.

I'm up here in the guest room—*my* room, apparently—because I need to get settled in and unpack my things. I'm staying and I'm relieved to be done with my broken suitcase. Before I fly home, I'll buy another one. This one is getting hurled into the nearest dumpster.

There's a tiny closet in the corner of the room filled with cardboard boxes. The top one is open, and I see foreign editions of Nathaniel's books stacked up inside. I can't imagine how many he's sent. I know every time a publisher finishes production on a project, they mail the author a set number of copies of the final book. With how popular Nathaniel is, he likely has hundreds of foreign editions lying around. These are French, and I love the cover with its black and blue nebula surrounded by distant stars. I wish I could read it to see how the translation holds up. I've read *The Last Exodus* and *Echo of Hope* each five times through, and I just finished my final reread on the plane ride over here. I've taken extensive notes on the plot and character arcs, my laptop is loaded with the style sheets from the previous two projects,

and I doubt there are many people outside of Nathaniel himself who understand the characters like I do. I didn't want to arrive in England unprepared. If he's going to trust me to help him, I have to be on top of things.

I push the boxes aside as best as possible and clear a few feet of space to hang my clothes. I wasn't exactly sure how long I was going to stay in England when I left. InkWell told me to be flexible with my travel schedule for a week or two. Hopefully my wardrobe will survive this harsh winter. I have a lavender beanie and matching gloves, two pairs of wool socks, and some cozy lounge clothes, but I feel like I need a full-blown parka to survive here. Nate's socks and sweatshirt are still in my room. I don't want to give them back to him until I can wash them first.

I need to go into town, so once I've put away my things, I work up the courage to ask Nate if I can borrow his car. He's still outside, working in the yard. He's shoveling snow now, making a clear path from the back door to the shed.

He pauses when I come outside, and he assesses me from head to toe. I'm bundled up as much as I can be with what I brought. He doesn't look happy to see me, but then, I'm beginning to understand that might just be his usual mood: eyebrows eternally furrowed, mouth ever-so-slightly frowning.

"I'd like to go into town to get some provisions and send a few emails." I say this with an assertiveness I had to practice up in my room for five minutes before coming down. I'm proud I pulled it off.

He returns to his project. "Give me ten minutes and I'll drive you."

"I have my license."

"In the States," he says, sounding only slightly more irritable than normal. "Not here."

Well great, I didn't think this through. "Never mind, I don't really need to go that badly. You keep doing—"

"It's fine. Let me just finish up." He lifts his chin. "Go inside. On the back door, I have a better coat you can put on."

I look down at my puffer. “This one is okay.”

He shakes his head and drops his shovel as he passes me by so he can yank open the back door and grab the coat. His coat. It’ll be hilariously big, but he still holds it out for me to take.

“My car has broken down before. I’ve had to walk all the way back to town to get a tow.”

Right. I accept the coat with a thank you and then rush in to make a grocery list. I want to get everything I might need now that I realize I’ll have to rely on Nate to get into town.

Ten minutes later, I’m buckling up in his car. I’m not even sure what make or model it is, some small European thing that might have been assembled in the ’60s, and seeing Nate stuff his tall frame into the driver’s seat makes me smile. He sees my reaction before I can turn away but doesn’t say anything. We bump down the road away from his cottage, and it’s dead silent beyond the tires on the snow.

I already have emails composed to send to my supervisor at work and my family. Now, I’m crafting a text message I can send to Andrew once I get cell service in Sedbergh. I’ve typed out and deleted sentences what feels like a hundred times. Even if Andrew and I are not officially together anymore and haven’t talked in a few weeks, I feel like I owe him some kind of explanation for where I am in case he reaches out. I don’t want him to think I’m purposely ignoring his texts or calls.

“Really concentrating over there,” Nate comments.

I jerk and tilt my phone away from him as if I’m embarrassed by what he might have read.

“Oh...just getting everything ready to send once I get cell service.”

“For your family?”

“Yeah, and work. And...”

Nate’s gaze slides to me like he’s curious about what I’m leaving off.

I change the subject. “Thank you,” I say, trying to initiate some semblance of conversation. “For taking me.”

“It’s fine. I needed to head into town for a few things anyway.”

“How often do you go into Sedbergh?”

I need to know when to expect another trip.

“It depends. At least a few times a week, when the weather allows it. I’ll be glad to take you whenever you need, though.”

I nod, knowing I won’t take him up on that unless it’s a life-or-death emergency. For some reason he’s had a sudden change of heart about me staying to help him work, and I still don’t fully understand why. Until I know his motives and how flimsy they might be, I’m going to be on my best houseguest behavior.

“I’m surprised you don’t drive something else.”

He furrows his brows. “What do you mean?”

I shrug, not sure how to say it without offending him.

He suddenly understands what I’m hinting at. The man is *loaded*, probably embarrassingly so. I’ve heard rumors about his contract terms and how much they exceed every other author on our roster. “This car works fine.”

“Except for when it breaks down.”

“Except for when it breaks down,” he concedes, seeing the humor in my point.

“Do you ever walk into town?”

“No, but I have a bicycle I use a lot in the summer.”

I make a mental note to check where he keeps it. It’d be nice to know in case I’m in a pinch.

Last night, I was turned around in the dark, but I’ve been keeping careful watch on our drive this morning, and I realize it’s pretty much a straight shot to town once you leave the cottage and take a left. Ten minutes later, we’re on Main Street, a narrow one-lane road that cuts through the heart of

Sedbergh. Though small, the historic market town is charming and packed full of old architecture. Most of the buildings are constructed from gray and brown stone, though there are a few Victorian and Tudor-inspired shopfronts sprinkled in.

A few pedestrians walk along the ancient-looking cobblestone sidewalk, and Nate slows the car, not wanting to unintentionally spray anyone with snow. We pass The Green Door Sweet Shop with its sign: *Tobacconist, Greeting Cards, Toys, Maps*. A few restaurants are open for the late lunch crowd: Smatt's Duo Cafe, Al Forno Italian Kitchen, The Dalesman Country Inn, and The Red Lion Pub.

I'm surprised. The way Nate was going on about everything, I thought Sedbergh would be a total ghost town. We pass a local book shop, and then another. I turn back in disbelief. How can a town this small keep one bookstore in business, much less two? I'm still wondering when we come across a *third*.

"There are so many bookstores," I say, my voice filled with wonder.

Nate nods. "Sedbergh is England's official 'Book Town.'"

I lean toward the window, curious. "What does that mean? What's a Book Town?"

Sounds like my dream place to live honestly.

"They're small rural places—like Sedbergh—where secondhand and antiquarian bookshops are concentrated. Last I checked, we have five official bookstores, but most shops on Main Street have a section of secondhand books for sale, even the pharmacy. On top of that, there are annual literary festivals too. It brings in a lot of tourists in late spring and summer."

My jaw is on the floor. "That's amazing. What a cool place!"

Nate nods in agreement then points down at my phone on my lap. "You should have cell service now."

"Right. Of course."

I fire off the drafted email to Joy, my supervisor, first, giving her an update about Crown House and my temporary living situation. Pressing send gives me a little zing of excitement. I'm sure she'll be shocked that Nate is willing to work with me (at least for now). After hearing more of Nate's side of things, I realize Joy likely thought I'd be on the first available flight back to New York, returning with my tail between my legs.

My family gets an email next, filled with all the pertinent information they might need about where I am (surprise!), and a lot of reassurances that I'm completely fine even if they have a hard time getting ahold of me. My parents have never been the type to check in daily, but they might worry since I'm so far from home. I include Nate's address and directions for how to get there from Sedbergh just to put everyone's mind at ease.

Then just as Nate swings into a parking spot outside a small grocery store, I reopen the text I was working on for Andrew.

Summer: Hey, sorry to be texting you randomly. I know we're not really talking right now and I respect that. I hope things are going well for you. I just wanted to let you know that work has taken me to England. I'm staying in a tiny town called Sedbergh. It's an exciting opportunity, but cell service is horrible and I

That's where I left off before because I'm not sure how I'm supposed to end a text message to a man who isn't currently my boyfriend but *could* be my boyfriend again in the near future.

Nate cuts the engine and looks over to find me staring down at my phone screen like I'm trying to work out a complicated math equation. I drop my phone into my lap and sigh.

We look at each other and then simultaneously look away. It's hard to sit here together in such a confined space.

"I can't find the right words," I volunteer.

He nods, already grabbing for his door handle. “I’ll give you a second. I need to head down to a shop a little that way. I’ll meet you back here when I’m done.”

I watch him get out of the car and close the door. He heads up onto the sidewalk, walking confidently. He has long legs and a good butt. His jeans fit him perfectly. These...*these* wonderful thoughts flit across my mind instead of what the hell I’m going to send to Andrew!

I give myself a little shake and look back down at my phone, typing the first thing that comes to mind. It’s best not to overthink stuff like this, right?

Anyway, it’s okay if you still need space. I don’t blame you. If you reach out and I’m radio silent, just know it’s because I’m literally in the middle of nowhere, haha.

Sent.

There. The important people in my life know where I am. Time to shop.

There’s not a lot of choice in the small grocery store, but I make do. I’ve thought ahead for a few meals so Nate and I aren’t eating scraps over the next couple of days. His fridge was packed, but upon closer inspection it was a bunch of junk that needed to be thrown out: old jam, a jar with one olive, that kind of thing.

There’s a man positioned behind the counter in the shop watching television. When he sees me approach with my full basket, he stands up off his stool and waves me over. He’s short and rotund with ruddy cheeks and a white mustache that matches his bushy brows.

“Alright?” he asks me with a thick British accent.

I assume he’s asking how I’m doing, so I smile. “Good, yeah, what about you?”

“Aye, not bad,” he says while starting to ring up my items. “I’m not too chuffed about all the snow we’ve been getting though. Was hoping for a mild winter.”

I look back outside to see the sun that peeked out while we were driving seems to have disappeared completely behind the dark clouds.

“From the States?” he asks me when I turn back toward him.

I nod. “Just arrived.”

“Knackered after the long journey?”

“No, not really.”

It’s surprising I don’t feel more tired considering how little sleep I’ve had over the last forty-eight hours.

“Where are you staying? Got family in the area?”

“No, I wish. It’s a beautiful town. I’m here for work.”

This makes him raise his brows. “Are ya? Anthony mentioned bringing someone in for marketing at Westwood. Thought it’d take him longer to find someone.”

“No, not Anthony. Um, Nathaniel? Not sure—”

He laughs with delight. “Nathaniel Foster?”

I nod, smiling along only because his grin is so contagious.

“Didn’t know he was hiring anyone. What’s he need with an employee?”

“Oh—”

I suddenly realize it might have served me better to just keep my big mouth shut. I don’t know what Nate feels comfortable sharing, and he clearly values his privacy. No one hunkers down in a faraway cottage in the English countryside if they want their business shared with everybody.

“Nothing really. Paperwork.”

That’s the ultra-clever lie I come up with just as the door chimes and we both turn to see Nate tapping the snow off his boots before making his way inside. His tan cheeks are a little rosy. His usually unruly hair is hidden under a forest green beanie. Stick him with a golden retriever and a wife in coordinating tartan and he’d be the centerpiece of a J.Crew ad.

His handsomeness only seems to be growing on me. I've been around him now for almost a full day and I still blush and look away, back to the man ringing up my groceries. He's been watching me this whole time, and now his eyes narrow slightly at the corners with a mischievous glint. *Oh god.*

"Got everything you need?" Nate asks me as he approaches.

"Just about."

The shopkeeper finishes ringing me up, and then I look at the total: 170 pounds. Yikes. The trouble with small specialty stores like this is that you end up paying for convenience.

"Let me cover it," Nate says, reaching for his wallet.

I immediately retrain my face, hoping I wasn't giving anything away.

I'm not poor; I'm just trying to be sensible about my money. My parents helped with college, which I'm hugely appreciative of, but grad school was on me. With mounting school loans, I sure wish newly hired developmental editors were paid a *little* better. I don't complain about it though, especially to my family or Andrew. They'd love to remind me of the error of my ways. If only I'd listened to them I wouldn't be wincing at having to pay for my grocery bill.

"I've got it," I tell him with a forced smile, and then I hand my card over to the man behind the counter before Nate can protest.

"Aye up," the man says to Nate. "Need anything?"

"I'm all set."

When I start to collect my bags, Nate beats me to it. "Let's go. Thanks, Martin."

"I can get those," I tell him, hurrying behind him. With the height he has on me, when he really gets going, I can barely keep up.

Just as we cross the threshold of the shop, Nate stops short, and I collide with his back, which feels like what I imagine it's like to smash your face into a slab of concrete.

“Sorry,” Nate and I say in tandem. Then I spot a brunette woman just on the other side of him—the reason for his abrupt stop.

“Didn’t mean to almost run you over,” he tells her.

The woman laughs and looks up at Nate with a pretty smile and earnest brown eyes. “Nathaniel. Hi!”

She unfurls a purple scarf from around her neck, and Nate steps aside to let her walk into the shop. She looks to him and then to me. Her smile falters for a millisecond, but only barely.

“I’m Alice,” she says in an American accent. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

She extends a gloved hand, and I accept it as I introduce myself. “Summer.” Then I look to Nate.

“What brings you to this desolate village this time of year?” Alice asks. “I rarely see outsiders between January and April. Only the fools who call this place home.”

She tosses a wink at Nate, and I feel left out and jealous. Which is ridiculous, but even knowing that doesn’t stop the feeling from intensifying.

“She’s helping Nathaniel with *paperwork*,” Martin supplies with a healthy dose of sarcasm.

I feel the heat of Nate’s gaze, but I don’t dare look at him. I know I’m already blushing.

I need to reroute the conversation immediately.

“Are you two friends?” I ask, hoping I sound chipper rather than jealous.

The question seems innocent, but it’s not. I’m hungry for more information on Nate. He’s so buttoned-up and quiet, austere and mysterious. I’m not going to pass up the opportunity to glean more information about him by any means possible.

“Friends.” She laughs coyly, and I have my answer. These two have definitely slept together. I study her with fresh eyes. She’s about my height and looks to be closer to Nate’s age,

early thirties. Her hair is a rich dark brown, and her face is gentle and friendly. “The only two Americans in Sedbergh. We have to stick together,” she continues when Nate fails to.

“Alice runs Main Street Books,” Nate supplies with a neutral tone.

“Oh how cool! I saw a few of the book shops on our way into town. I’ll have to stop in. How long have you owned it?”

“Took it over when my grandmother retired a few years ago.” Her gaze is on me for only a moment before she’s focused on Nate again. “Right around when Nathaniel moved to town. It was nice having a friend, someone else who was new.”

She looks up at him with shining eyes, and there’s no doubt she’s completely head over heels for him.

I look up at him out of the corner of my eyes, but his focus is down on the grocery bags. He adjusts their weight in his hands and smiles tightly.

“It was good to see you, Alice,” he says curtly then nods for me to follow.

“Nice to meet you,” I tell her before hurrying after Nate.

Once the groceries are loaded and we’re clicking our seatbelts into place, I just can’t help myself.

“She’s really pretty,” I say with an air of indifference.

“She is,” he says like it’s a matter of fact, focusing on his rearview mirror. He has his hand on my headrest, his body turned halfway. His scent fills the car, soap or aftershave or whatever it is. I like it.

When he succeeds in backing up, he moves his hand from my seat, accidentally brushing my arm.

Butterflies. A thousand of them.

I grab ahold of the elbow he touched like it’s injured and then I trudge on. “Any interest there? Must get lonely out here in the winter months. She seemed to like you.”

“Why are you asking?”

His tone is brusque, borderline rude.

I shake my head. “No reason. Just...making conversation.”

“Did you hear from your family?” he asks, redirecting the conversation.

I hadn't even thought to look while I was grocery shopping. I didn't feel my phone buzz, but it was in the pocket of my puffer jacket the whole time.

Sure enough, when I pull it out, I see Andrew has texted me back.

Andrew: Wow. You're kidding. How long will you be there?

I feel bad for not responding to him sooner.

Summer: I'm not sure, actually. I'll try to reach out when I can. I'm about to lose cell service again.

“Boyfriend?” Nate asks, tightening his hold on the steering wheel for a moment before relaxing and shifting his hands. Finally, he drops one hand altogether.

I study him, wondering...

“Why are you asking?”

I swear the corner of his mouth rises.

God.

That mouth. I know Alice has felt that mouth on her body. I've never been more jealous of another human being, and I once watched a lady snag the last pair of size-8 thigh-high boots at a Stuart Weitzman after-season sale.

“Just making conversation,” Nate replies.

“By the way, we just passed an inn.” I narrow my eyes suspiciously. “And I think I saw a hotel back there too. I thought you told me there was nowhere for me to stay in town?”

He frowns, keeping his eyes on the road. “This time of year, there isn't. A few shops and restaurants are open with restricted hours, but the hotels in town aren't letting rooms.

They're only open for the festival crowds in the summer. You could find a place in Kendal, but you don't have a car and there's not a train to get there."

"So you're really okay with letting a perfect stranger live with you?"

He shrugs. "You're an employee of InkWell. You've been vetted and checked a thousand times over, I'm sure." He looks over as if scoping me out. I know it's meant to be teasing, but the way his eyes draw down my body, I swear there's heat behind it. Then, finally, he adds, "I'll take my chances."

I shift in my seat and look out the window. "Right. It's probably me who should be worried. You're the recluse author, the man living by himself in the middle of nowhere..."

"Scared?" he asks lightly.

I know it's meant to be a joke, but the question rings true.

Yeah, I am.

Terrified, actually.

CHAPTER 7

NATE

I HAVEN'T SHARED my space with someone in years, not since before I moved to England. This cottage has only ever been *my* home. My kitchen has only ever been *my* kitchen, but when I walk downstairs in the evening after showering, I find Summer destroying it.

Well...destroying is a strong word. She could possibly be cleaning? The trash bin is sitting over near the sink, overflowing with junk she's pulled out of the cupboards and fridge.

"You've been busy" is my passive-aggressive way of calling her out.

She spins around and smiles, propping her hands on her hips. She's wearing jeans and a white V-neck, her sweater tied around her waist. Her strawberry blonde hair is twisted up on top of her head. A few strands slip free of the knot and frame her face.

I shouldn't notice the way her t-shirt stretches a little too tight across her chest. I shouldn't notice a lot of things about her.

"I took the liberty of organizing the fridge." She pulls it open to show me and then sweeps her arms out Vanna White style. "Got rid of a few expired condiments."

By few, she means a lot.

I frown and step up beside her so I can lean down and inspect her work. "Those were best-by dates, not expiration

dates,” I point out, annoyed that she’s already messing things up. My fridge looks empty now. Where’d all the food go?

“Yes, well, I’m used to yellow mustard, not *green*,” she says playfully.

I stand up to my full height again and look down at her. We’re close enough now that I can pick apart all the varying green hues in her eyes. Beautiful.

I look at her mouth and frown. “I want my mustard back.”

She rolls her eyes. “Fine. Go digging.”

She’s pointing to the trash bin. I have half a mind to actually do it.

“Now, I’m happy to label things mine and yours,” she continues, “but it seems silly. We can share if you’re okay with that. I promise I won’t eat all of your chocolate.” She notices my alarmed reaction, and it makes her laugh. “Don’t worry.” She shakes her head. “I didn’t throw away the bar you had on that shelf.”

I tug a hand through my damp hair, and it makes me shiver. It’s cold in here. I haven’t put the fire on yet.

I nod toward her t-shirt. “Aren’t you cold?”

I really need her to put her sweater back on.

She shrugs and waves away my concern. “I’ve been working. You wouldn’t believe the crap I found. A box of crackers from 2005!”

I smirk. “That’s practically a collector’s item.”

She laughs and shakes her head again. “Did you even bother going through the kitchen when you moved in?”

No, actually; I never cared to. But I don’t admit that to her.

“I’m going to make dinner if that’s okay...since you made breakfast. I’m a pretty good cook. My mom’s amazing and she’s taught me a lot.”

Summer is a talker. The entire time I’m in front of the fireplace, loading logs and striking a match, she goes on about

her mom's cooking. It doesn't matter to her that I don't respond; she just keeps on going.

This cottage has housed nothing but silence for years. Occasionally, I'll put on a record or listen to an audiobook, but the majority of evenings, I enjoy the peace and quiet. Summer has completely shattered that.

I need some wine.

But when I go to get my corkscrew out of the drawer where I usually keep it, I find the silverware.

"Dammit, why did you rearrange everything?"

I open another drawer and slam it closed.

"The kitchen made no sense! You had the knives and forks in one drawer and the spoons in another. I found an old moldy lemon in that drawer over there! Took me ten minutes to scrub the spot clean."

I give up on finding the corkscrew, grab my jacket off the back door, stuff my feet in my boots, and head straight outside. Never mind that it's cold as hell out here with my wet hair. I need to get out of the house and away from Summer. Except *bloody hell*, my jacket smells like her. This is the one she wore into town today, and her perfume lingers on it, floral and sweet.

I throw up the hood, stuff my hands in my pockets, and stomp over to the shed. I need to make sure the firewood is stacked on the tarp and out of the snow. I don't want it getting wet. The task would normally only take me ten or fifteen minutes, but I stretch it out, lingering until I have no excuse but to go back inside. Besides, my hands are nearly frozen.

The kitchen smells amazing, rich and savory. I kick the snow off my boots and drop my hood. Summer looks over at me, smiling that effervescent smile. Her toes wiggle in her socks. Her jeans fit her ass perfectly.

I haven't slept with Alice in a year, which means I haven't slept with anyone in a year. That's too long. Clearly. I'm looking at Summer like she's ready to be devoured. It doesn't help that she has a body fit for Aphrodite, those long legs and

curves. She reaches down into a lower cabinet for something and I see down the top of her t-shirt. It's like I'm staring at something forbidden. Every part of me takes notice.

This isn't going to work.

I need her gone. Now.

I open my mouth to tell her to pack her bags right when she steps away from the stove to grab a serving spoon. "I made pasta with spicy sausage and spaghetti squash. Hope you're hungry."

Fuck me. I am.

"I opened a bottle of red. Your glass is on the table," she tells me.

Sure enough, the bottle sits between two place settings. She's gone to a lot of trouble to make it look nice.

"Thanks," I mumble before going over to wash my hands so I can take a seat.

I know this dinner is going to be awkward, and it is. With how confined the kitchen is, it feels like we're right on top of each other when she comes around to serve me. Her hip brushes my arm when she asks if I want any parmesan cheese.

I clear my throat. "Yes, please."

Maybe we need some ground rules. Like she's not allowed to come downstairs from the hours of 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.

She takes her seat and picks up her wine, groaning as she takes the first sip. More of her hair has slipped out of her knot. She looks completely undone. Ravaged.

I get busy eating my dinner. The faster I finish, the faster I can escape upstairs.

I down my wine, and she refills my glass with a small smile. I nod in thanks and drop my napkin in my lap then watch as she leans forward to take a bite.

It won't help me to ignore the fact that Summer is insanely gorgeous. Admitting that to myself, in my head, might make this slightly easier. I've tried to ignore it all day and that hasn't

worked, so I'll call a spade a spade and go from there. Maybe trying to force down my reaction to her is part of the problem.

"Do you like it?" she asks, referring to the pasta I've scarfed down in record time.

"It's great."

It's flavorful, and I like that it packs a punch with the sausage.

"It's my mom's recipe. Like I said, she's an avid cook."

"Does she work?"

She nods and wipes her mouth with her napkin before replying. "She and my dad are both physicians. My sister and brother too."

"And you are—"

"*Not,*" she interrupts with a flat smile as she rolls her eyes. "I'm the zany wild child."

"You don't seem wild."

She cocks an eyebrow in protest. "No?"

Fire burns through me, and I reach for my wine glass again.

"My parents would disagree with you. I think they've fully accepted that I'm a lost cause."

"I don't understand. Because you didn't go into medicine?" I sound incredulous.

She shrugs one delicate shoulder. "Among other things."

"Did you get in a lot of trouble growing up or something?"

I can't picture it. She seems like the studious type, a teacher's pet if there ever was one.

She laughs at the suggestion. "No. Not at all. I've never had detention or anything. I'm one of those people who hates getting in trouble. What about you? Were you wild?"

"I was a latchkey kid. My parents gave me a lot of rope, and I never really tried to abuse their trust."

She studies me as I talk, her head tilting to the side ever so gently. “How old are you?”

“Thirty-four. Shouldn’t you have already known that? Didn’t InkWell give you a file with every bit of information they have on me?”

Her eyes alight with the suggestion. “No, but I wish they had. All your deep, dark secrets?” Her eyebrows waggle. “I’d love to read them.”

“There’s nothing deep or dark about me.”

She snorts in disbelief. “You should get an outsider’s perspective.”

“So tell me.”

She forces a swallow as her expression sobers. “What I think about you?” Her voice is shaky now; she seems worried where the conversation is going.

“You’re an outsider, aren’t you?” I press.

That’s what Alice called her at the shop earlier.

She shakes her head and looks down, gulping more of her wine. “It’s not my place to say. Sorry. It’s hard not to blur the lines. I know I’m here to work, so why don’t we do that? Work, I mean. Over dinner?”

“I’d rather continue our conversation.”

Her cheeks heat, and I like how responsive she is, how little it takes to get a reaction out of her. Is she like that everywhere? Pink and flushed?

“You shouldn’t tempt me. I’ve had too much wine. I had a glass while I was cooking, so behave.”

The command makes me want to do the exact opposite. I shift in my seat, and my leg bumps into hers under the table. I wait for her to move. Our eyes meet, and her eyes widen. There’s a suspended longing in the air—something that could ignite.

Bloody hell. What am I doing with this girl?! Have I lost my mind?

I screech my chair away from the table and take my plate to the sink.

“Leave it,” she tells me. “I can clean up.”

I ignore her and wash my dish and wine glass and silverware. I dry everything with a hand towel and replace the wine glass and plate on the shelves above the kitchen fireplace. I can feel Summer’s gaze on me. She’s watching me like she’s a scared little rabbit. She wants to be prepared for what I’ll do next.

She speaks up shyly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to derail dinner.”

The fact that she’s apologizing only makes me more annoyed. I grab my coat off the door and, without looking back, tell her I’ll see her later.

The Red Lion Pub will be open, and if I’m lucky, they’ll have my favorite beer on tap.

CHAPTER 8

SUMMER

I LISTEN to Nate's car drive away and groan.

Well that's just great. Night two of me being in this cottage by myself. At least last night Nate was upstairs in case I needed him for something. Tonight, it's just me, myself, and I.

It's a little eerie being here all alone for the first time. In New York, I'm never this isolated. At any given time, I'm surrounded on all sides by a million people—on the subway, in my apartment, on the street. Currently I can hear an owl hooting outside and wood crackling in the fireplace, but beyond that, *nothing*.

I let my fork drop to my plate and am tempted to let my forehead follow, but I don't want pasta in my hair. I don't know what I'm doing wrong here. Nate has asked me to stay, but he hasn't warmed up to me at all. I thought making a nice dinner would help him soften a bit, but the whole thing was uncomfortable. Even now, my shoulders are bunched up, my muscles tense. No one has ever affected me like this, hijacking my ability to take a full breath. I'm nervous around him likely because I want to make a good impression, but the more I want to prove myself, the harder it becomes to act normal.

I thought the wine would help me loosen up, but then his leg brushed mine under the table and my stomach swooped low and likely *that's* why he ran. He probably choked on the damn pheromones wafting off me in cartoonish lines. I'm not fooling anyone here.

I wish I'd had longer to talk to Andrew today. Hearing his voice and being reminded of what we have would make it simpler to set aside these fledgling feelings I'm having for Nate as nothing more than lust. My interest in Nate likely happens to *anyone* when they're around him. Take Alice, for example! She clearly sees what I see. Big deal.

This isn't personal. It's business.

I push back from the table and take my plate to the sink. At least I can busy myself with fifteen minutes of dinner cleanup. After that, though, I'm on my own. Just me and Nate's cottage and Nate's Cadbury Dairy Milk chocolate bar I steal from the shelf. I know I told him I wouldn't, but I can't help but break off a few squares. I need a sweet treat after dinner, sue me. He's not here to stop me, so who cares? I'll buy him a replacement the next time I go into town.

I carry the chocolate and my wine into the living room and sit down next to the fire. I wonder where Nate went at this time of night. Is he with Alice? Do they have a standing date every Thursday evening?

If so, they must meet at her place. I don't see any sign of her laying claim to the cottage. There's no spare toothbrush in the bathroom other than mine, no lipstick lying around. I stick my hand down on the side of the chair cushion and come away with a button, but no sexy lingerie.

Oh my god. I'm losing my mind. I've never had so little to do. I like it but I also *hate* it. I can't believe Nate lives this way. I haven't been without internet access in years. I know he prefers it, but he'd be better off living on a deserted island somewhere. At least then there'd be no harsh winters.

As someone who loves to read, I'm grateful there's no shortage of books to pick from in this cottage. Nate has a veritable library, but I decide I'm going to do the practical thing and get some work done. I have all my notes for the *Cosmos* trilogy up in my bedroom: character outlines, plot points, style sheets. It's at least a hundred printed-out pages I had spiral bound for easy access. I've gone through it all so many times I practically have it memorized at this point. The

names of the planets and star systems, the crew and every detail of their interpersonal relationships.

Nate hasn't sent InkWell an outline for book three, so I have no idea where he plans to take the series. I have educated guesses and my own personal hopes, but until he gives me insight into what he's planning, I can't really help.

I end up eating every morsel of that chocolate bar, and then I curl up on the couch underneath the blanket, reading through my notes until I fall asleep. In the morning, I wake up with a start, confused until I realize I'm tucked in my bed, nice and cozy under the covers. I lie still, trying to recall how I got up here. Did Nate carry me to bed when he got home? He must have. I don't sleepwalk.

It makes me feel tingly and weird to know he had me in his arms. Please god, tell me I didn't rub my cheek against his chest or nuzzle against him like a weirdo. *I would.*

I look down, worried for a split second before I see I'm still in my clothes from yesterday. He didn't undress me. Of course he wouldn't. How inappropriate!

I fling my covers off and accidentally drop them onto Cat, who doesn't care one bit. He just stays there cocooned in the warmth.

I take a fresh set of clothes into the bathroom down the hall, shower, and change. After I dry my hair, I apply a little makeup, which feels silly because who's going to see me here except Nate? But getting ready for the day makes me feel better, or at least that's the explanation I delude myself with. Never mind that most of the time in grad school I'd lumber out of bed and leave my apartment wearing yesterday's leggings and a sweatshirt pulled from the pile of clothes on my desk chair.

I take my dirty clothes back to my room and tidy up a little bit. A few minutes later, I hear the shower running down the hall, so Nate must be awake now too. I wonder when he got back last night. I'm frowning as I think over what he was doing—his time spent with Alice—and then once I realize I'm frowning, I force a laugh (which feels a little crazy in my room

by myself). Cat is the only one around to hear me, and he's still underneath the covers. He's only poked his nose out for air.

I'll need to do laundry in a few days, but for now I still have clothes and underwear to tide me over. I grab a pair of socks and hurry to put them on. My toes are freezing after my shower. Then I head out into the hall just in time to come face to face with Nate as he leaves the bathroom. He has one hand fisting the top of a towel slung low around his hips.

He's not wearing any clothes.

HE'S NOT WEARING ANY CLOTHES.

The air leaves my lungs in a rush. I need to step to the side so he can get to his room, but I don't move. I'm in shock. I watch water droplets sluice down his muscular chest and trim stomach. I knew he was tall and formidable, but I didn't imagine his body was this incredible. Wide shoulders, broad chest, and a tapered waist. My gaze sweeps across him like I have the right to look when I should be covering my eyes and excusing myself, scooting past him as quickly as possible. If he accidentally dropped that towel...

The butterflies come back with a vengeance again. It's the feeling I've wished for a thousand times, only it doesn't feel quite as innocent as before. It's accompanied by a tightening in my stomach, a heat that sears. Suddenly, it's too much.

I close my eyes and shake my head. My hand belatedly flies up to shield my eyes. "I'm sorry!"

I always bring my clothes into the bathroom with me so I can change in there after I shower. Maybe he forgot to bring his clothes with him this time... Maybe this is his cottage and he can do whatever the hell he wants... Maybe I should stop peeking at him through my fingers...

Nate doesn't say a word as he walks past. To him, this is nothing.

His door opens and closes, and I'm left pressed against the wall in the hallway, trying to catch my breath. I can see my

chest rising and falling, quickly. My heart thinks I'm running a marathon.

I look up to the ceiling and force a deep, yoga-inspired inhale. *In through your nose, out through your mouth.* Then I shake it off and head downstairs. I refuse to let him affect me like this. He is just a man and I'm just a woman. And so what if I'm still picturing him in there, whipping that towel off and...

Agh!

I take the stairs two at a time like if I flee fast enough, I'll be able to shake free of my feelings and leave them up in that hallway never to be felt again. Downstairs, there's an old English sheepdog lying in front of the fireplace, his face nearly lost beneath a heavy coat of white and gray fur. When he sees me coming down the stairs, his tail starts to wag with excitement, thumping against the floor like a drum.

A little squeal of excitement erupts out of me. This must be the dog Nate talked about, the one who comes to visit every now and then.

"Oh hi, big guy!"

He's too old to get up with ease, so I go to him, crouching down so I can rub his soft head and ears. Oh, he's so warm. He's been getting toasty by the fire for a while it seems. Did Nate let him in this morning or last night? I ask him his name and where he's from. He responds by licking my hand and then my cheek.

"Nate warned me about the animals, but I didn't think I'd get so lucky to be greeted by you this morning, you gorgeous man."

"Who are you talking to?"

I look over my shoulder to see the *other* gorgeous man just as he steps off the last stair. Today, he's going to torture me in a cream cable knit sweater and navy pants. His hair is damp and messy.

"You need a haircut," I tell him before turning back to give the dog my full attention. He's such a sweet thing, turning over

onto his back so I'll rub his chest and belly.

"I know," Nate replies. "Want to give me one?"

I sputter out a reply. "What? No way. I'd botch it."

"No, you won't. Come on. All you have to do is trim it up a bit. I have a good pair of scissors around here somewhere."

I whip around to admonish him. "*Nate.*"

He doesn't even look at me as he gets his coffee. "The nearest barber is in Kendal, and I'm not driving all the way there for a haircut. So if you won't help me out, I'm just going to shave it."

Dear god *no*. All that gorgeous brown hair, slightly curled and boyish—I'd have a heart attack if he took it all off.

He starts opening drawers in the kitchen. "I would have already found the scissors if you hadn't moved things around."

"Need I remind you about the moldy lemon? The scissors are now all grouped together in that drawer there."

He follows my finger and yanks the drawer open, immediately finding what he's looking for. Imagine that.

He waves them in the air. "Hop to it."

"*Now?* I haven't even had my coffee."

"Good, your hands will be steadier."

From upstairs, Nate grabs a towel and a black comb. Then he takes a seat in one of the kitchen chairs, waiting for me. When I don't budge, he lifts an eyebrow, taunting me. I push to stand, promising Dog I'll be back for more pets in a bit. He flops back down on the ground, happy to stay right where he is in front of the fire.

"I really shouldn't do this," I tell Nate.

I've never cut a man's hair before. Andrew would never, ever let me get near his head with a pair of scissors. Every three weeks, he goes to a men's salon in Manhattan and spends upwards of \$100 on a cut he's sported the entirety of our

relationship. He likes it trimmed neat and short, parted on the right side, held in place with pomade.

I don't mind that Andrew's a little vain about his looks. In his job, it's expected. But something tells me Nate would balk at the idea of spending that kind of money on a haircut. He holds out the scissors for me to take when I get near him.

"Just try," he implores, holding my gaze. "If it's horrible, I'll go get a real haircut."

"Fine, but while I cut, we discuss work. Deal?"

I take his silence as an agreement and get busy wrapping the towel around his shoulders. A chip clip holds it in place. We are *very* professional around here.

"Where'd you go last night?" I ask as I curve around him to stand at his back.

"Into town."

"See anyone interesting?"

"Usual crowd," he says, his tone flat and disinterested.

I wonder if the usual crowd included Alice. I'm so hung up on them. Maybe I wouldn't be if I knew the score. If I knew for sure they were together, it wouldn't needle me so much.

There's no way of asking outright though. He'd have to volunteer it. Discussing each other's dating lives feels too intimate. Of course, cutting his hair feels too intimate too, but here we are.

"Are you going to get started?" he prompts.

"Yes, hush, you. I'm just trying to get a feel for your hair. It has a lot of curl to it."

I haven't actually touched him yet. Deep down, I'm a little scared to.

"I won't cut much, just a half inch or so," I tell him.

He holds up the scissors over his shoulder, and I take them on an exhale. Here goes nothing.

I start small, insanely small. The first snip only takes off three, maybe four strands.

“So you want to talk about work?” he asks.

I thought I did. Now, I realize I’ll need laser-sharp focus if I’m going to pull this off.

“No talking,” I say, my tone like a drill sergeant.

He chuckles under his breath, and I lean down so I can trim a little bit more. It gets easier as I go. I realize I’m not completely inept at this, and my less-is-more strategy is paying off. I snip slowly, shaping up the back first. I’m a natural, and the talent goes to my head quickly enough. I tell him to look down, *here, there, a little left, more left*, as confident as if I’ve been doing this my whole life. He does as he’s told, and he’s quiet.

To say it’s a pleasure to have my hands all over his hair is an understatement. It’s one of the greatest joys I’ve experienced in life, and we’re including milestones like holding my baby niece in my arms for the first time.

His hair is thick and silky even as it air dries. Before long, I have the back and sides just the way I want them, and I slowly work my way to the front.

There’s no way around it. I tap his knee so he’ll part his legs. Stepping up between them is the only way for me to trim the front of his hair without leaning over him and killing my back. I don’t want to be in this position, tucked securely between his thighs. Believe me, if I could, I’d tape my scissors to a yardstick and give him a haircut from across the kitchen.

We would be better off keeping our distance from each other. I’m intimately aware of his powerful legs sandwiching mine. He’s so careful not to touch me, holding perfectly still. Nate’s height means my chest is at his eyeline. I’m basically offering my breasts up to him on a silver platter. I’ve never been flat-chested and lithe, like Emma. She got the ballerina body whereas I look more like a ’40s pinup girl.

I open my mouth to apologize, but I hold my tongue, thinking maybe it’s better if I just don’t call attention to what

he's already well aware of. Had I known I was going to be in this position, I would have thrown on a turtleneck this morning instead of a thin long-sleeved V-neck. I'm not sporting a ton of cleavage, but there's some. With me, there's *always* some.

To his credit, Nate doesn't say a word or show any sign of acknowledgment. To him, this is just a simple haircut. Nothing weird about it. I lean in, and our eyes lock. All at once, my serious bubble pops, and I laugh.

"How awkward is this?"

"It's fine," he promises, his voice a little husky.

So maybe he's not completely immune to me...

Andrew has never been the type to focus on my looks. He's generous and attentive in bed—I really like our sex life—but I get the impression my curves are a little too much for him. Like my body *as a whole* is too much for him. I never wear lingerie and rarely dress in a way that accentuates my chest. Once, at a work dinner, my dress was a bit low cut, and he had me put his jacket on, insisting to everyone that I'd asked him for it when I really hadn't. I wasn't even cold.

Whenever I've asked him what he likes most about me, trying to figure out if he's more of a butt guy or a boob guy, he's given me a trite response. "You're beautiful, Summer, but it's your brain I like the most."

Blah blah blah. Of course I like my brain. I'm not an idiot, but sometimes a woman just wants to feel desired. It wouldn't be so bad if *occasionally* Andrew had to fight to keep his hands off me.

Now, Nate's hands curl into fists, and when he sees me notice, he flattens them out on his thighs and closes his eyes.

"I can smell your shampoo," he tells me.

I swear he sounds almost like he's in pain. Maybe I need to hurry this up. He probably didn't anticipate it taking so long. I run my hands through his hair and decide I'll leave the top a bit longer than the sides. Nate has the perfect sort of hair for an at-home haircut. There's a wave to it so as it continues to dry, it hides all the flaws.

When I'm nearly done, I step back and give it a once-over, find a spot I need to trim a little more, and then continue on until I'm confident I've done, if not a great job, at least a pretty good one.

I prop my hands on my hips and smile. "Done."

He eyes me from his seat on the chair. "Yeah? How do I look?"

Like hell am I going to answer that question truthfully.

"Fine," I say through clenched teeth. "Go take a look and tell me what you think."

He stands and shakes his towel out onto the floor, promising to sweep up the mess in a minute. Then he hurries up the stairs, and from the second-floor bathroom, he calls out. "It looks good!"

I release a nervous breath, glad to be done with that. Now, on to coffee.

Nate comes bounding back down the stairs, somehow better looking than before. So help me, if he ever trimmed his beard, I would pass out on the spot. Just up and die right then and there.

"Okay, sweep up while I make coffee, and then take a seat," I tell him. "I'm calling a meeting."

He looks over at me with an expression that says, *Who do you think you're talking to?*

I swallow and try not to lose all my confidence. "You promised me a conversation about work, and now I'm going to make good on it."

CHAPTER 9

NATE

I PULL the chair back from the kitchen table and take a seat with my coffee.

Summer is already sitting across from me, prepared as if she's going into corporate battle. She's found pens and lined them up neatly. There are two notepads (presumably one for each of us) and a spiralbound booklet that's as thick as a textbook. The title on the cover reads *Cosmos* Trilogy Notes.

Good lord.

"10 minutes," I tell her before taking a sip of my coffee.

She made a fresh pot, and it's good. I'll be sad to go back to my crappy stuff when she leaves.

She frowns. "Until...?"

"That's how long we'll discuss the book."

Her brows shoot up, and she grins. "*Sheesh*. That's a short workday."

"I have things to do."

Namely, I'd like to get the hell out of the kitchen. I needed a haircut and I'm glad it's done, but I was playing with fire letting Summer touch me like that. There's no way she didn't notice my reaction to her when she stood between my legs trimming my hair. I sat stock-still, barely breathing as she moved around me. It seemed like a good idea to have her give me a trim, save me the trouble of driving to Kendal, but then she wove her fingers through my hair and chills went down

my spine. I chastised myself the whole time, but it didn't help. Everything about her affects me. The smell of the shampoo she purchased at Martin's store, the cut of her simple V-neck shirt, the little sounds she made when she was satisfied with how things were going. She'd chew on her lip as she worked, studying my hair, trying to make it look perfect.

I'm staring at her lips now when she slides a notepad and pen toward me.

"Okay then, I guess we should get started if the clock is ticking."

Her tone is chipper; she isn't letting my bad attitude get to her. She whips open her typed notes and starts flipping through pages like she's on a mission.

"You ate my chocolate."

She pauses and peers up at me from beneath scrunched brows. "Your chocolate?" Then a second later, realization dawns. Her expression turns wary. "How'd you find out?"

I sit back in my chair with my coffee. "I wanted some when I got home last night. You can imagine my surprise when there was none left."

"Did you go looking for it after you carried me to bed?" she inquires gently. "You could have just left me there, y'know. I wasn't uncomfortable."

I shrug. "You were hanging halfway off the couch."

It's a partial lie. I got home last night to find Dog waiting for me near the back door. I let him in and gave him some food and water. I didn't realize Summer was asleep in the living room until I was heading over to put out the fire. She was on her side on the couch, her lips parted, her hair spilling out around her. Her blanket had slipped down so I knew she must be cold. I never considered leaving her there. I finished up downstairs, walked over, and hoisted her up into my arms. She didn't stir, and I had no trouble getting her upstairs. She was easy to carry, dead weight and all.

"Plus Dog likes to sleep on the couch sometimes," I explain easily. "You were in his way."

She smiles. “Right, well, I won’t make a habit of falling asleep down here.” Then she looks down at her notes. “Now, add two minutes to the timer.”

“There is no timer.”

She rolls her eyes. “I was being facetious.”

“We never did address the chocolate. Aren’t you even going to apologize?”

She lets her true feelings show for a second but then tucks them away and steadies her smile once again. “Yes, I’m sorry. I’ll get you a new one. Now will you please focus? I don’t think you’ve sent us a draft or summary for book three. Is that correct?”

“Correct.”

“Where are you with the story?”

“Haven’t started.”

Her eyes widen in alarm. “You mean you haven’t started writing? Or you haven’t started an outline?”

“Either or. Doesn’t matter.” I point at the booklet. “What do you have in that thing?”

She shakes her head as she looks down at it, answering with an impatient tone. “Notes. Descriptions. Names. Everything.” Then she looks up at me with an imploring gaze. “*Why haven’t you started?*”

Why is the sky blue? Why do McDonald’s fries taste better than Burger King’s? Why do I wake up every morning with a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach?

These seem like questions better aimed at someone else. God, perhaps. Or at least a shrink.

When I don’t give her a reply, she grabs a pen and quickly uncaps it then recaps it, over and over again, pushing it up and back down with the tip of her thumb while she thinks. I can’t help but feel like she doesn’t fully understand the severity of the situation she’s walked in on. She seems to think this can be solved if only we put our heads together, if only we try harder.

“Did InkWell tell you I worked with the same editor on *The Last Exodus* and *Echo of Hope*?” I ask, using the question as bait to see how much she knows.

“Yes, sure.” She frowns in confusion. “Someone mentioned her. Elaine something? She left to work at Black House after *Echo of Hope*. They poached her.”

Black House is InkWell’s biggest competitor. I still can’t believe Elaine jumped ship and joined the enemy.

I clear my throat and look at a spot just over Summer’s shoulder. “Yes, right. Without getting into the gritty details of all that, Elaine was by my side through the first two books. She had a huge hand in my success.”

Summer nods eagerly as if I’m going to continue on. I’m not. Surely the ten minutes is up.

I scoot back my chair.

“So what? She’s gone and you need a new editor. InkWell has sent quite a few your way, right? Noel and Kent, and who was the other one?” She’s rushing now, trying to keep me hooked on her line.

“Suzanne,” I supply.

“Suzanne. And now me.”

“And now you. Time’s up.”

I take a last big gulp of coffee as I stand and take it to the sink.

“What do you mean time’s up? *Nate!* We have to work.”

“No, actually we don’t. Not today.”

I head toward the back door. I don’t have a specific task on my agenda, but around here, there’s always something that needs doing, even in the dead of winter. Upkeep on a place like this is a full-time job. At least, I make it one. That way I can avoid the big looming problem hanging over my head. The problem Summer seems so intent on fixing.

“I have a supervisor, you know. People who want to know how I’m spending my time! I can’t just hang out in this

cottage all day, wiling away my life like—”

I turn around and aim daggers at her. “Like me?”

She gulps and looks down. I know she regrets her words, but they’re already out there, a bullet flying through the air.

“Seriously, just...sit down.” Her tone is gentle now; she’s trying to salvage this. “Let’s figure this out.”

“What do you not understand?!”

“Nothing apparently!” She explodes, matching my energy. “You make no sense! You blew up at me the other day about the fan mail. Is it the pressure from the readers? Because if it is, we can—”

I don’t let her finish the sentence. I whip open the door and leave without even grabbing my coat. I don’t care to go back and get it. I don’t even feel the chill anyway. I’d rather sit out in my shed all day than confront the conversation Summer’s trying to have with me. I won’t do it. I’ll call Patrick. God, the temptation is there. It’d be so easy to walk away. I could tear up the contract and pay back the advance. I haven’t touched the money. In fact, I’ve kept it in a high-yield savings account that’s been earning me interest. What do I need with more millions?

I’m not here now, suffering in this position, because of the money. It’s the rest of it, the deep-down desire to finish something I’ve started. I don’t want to walk away. I don’t want to leave this trilogy hanging over my head for the rest of my life, and while I know I don’t owe my readers anything, I still feel beholden to them. They trusted me when I was a nobody, they took a chance on my first book, and I want to give them the conclusion they deserve. But not today.

CHAPTER 10

SUMMER

“CAN YOU BELIEVE THAT?”

I puff out an indignant sigh like, *How dare he?!*

Then, once my temper cools a little, I add another question. “Was I too hard on him?”

I’m talking to the sheepdog and fully expecting that he’ll reply. He came over after Nate fled outside and dropped his head on my lap. He’s looking up at me with his big chocolate brown eyes, and I think he’s trying to apologize on behalf of his friend.

“I’m not evil, you know. I’m not intentionally trying to rile him up. I just have to do this. I have to work. I have a lot riding on this.”

It’s actually nice to air some of my grievances out loud. I should call Cat down here too, get a real audience going, maybe take a vote on what I should do.

“I’ve never met a man like him,” I tell the dog. “So hot and cold. I mean, he was so gentle and sweet when I was cutting his hair. But then the second I bring up the book, WHAM!” The dog startles at my loud voice, and I console him with a few pats on his head. “Game over.”

Now what?

I stand, and the dog follows me over to the sink while I wash my coffee cup. Through the window, I see Nate outside in the shed, moving rocks. MOVING ROCKS! Good grief,

we're back in the Stone Age, literally. Sir, you have legions of fans desperate for you to churn out written words—a book, your grocery list, anything—and you're making a rock stack?!

I need a distraction.

How is it only 9:15 a.m.? It's going to be a *long* day.

I wish I had other work to do, something to busy myself with. This is my only assignment, my sole job, and now that I'm actually trying to do it, I understand why InkWell didn't overload my plate with anything else. They're in a desperate position. They need Nate to come around. They need that third book.

I wish I could write the damn book for him. I love to write, but his readers would notice the difference. Nate's voice is so unique, colloquial and fun, even when it comes to the esoteric science aspects of his books. I'd botch it, and that would somehow be worse than this. I would go down in history as the woman who ruined the *Cosmos* trilogy. There'd be no coming back from that.

I just wish he would open up to me a little more, but I don't see that happening anytime soon. Not if he's going to leave the second we start discussing what really matters.

On the bright side, the sun is shining and a lot of the snow that's been coating the ground the last two days has melted off. I think it'll be a warm day by North England standards, so I'm going out on a walk. If I make it to town, great. If I get lost, oh well. Anything is better than staying in this cottage cooped up with Nate's anger stifling the place.

I invite the dog and the cat to come with me. The dog plops down in front of the fire, and the cat doesn't even look at me. I'm on my own.

I tuck my laptop and my phone in a small bag, that way if I make it to town, I can touch base with my family and check in with the rest of the world.

If Nate sees me leave, he doesn't call out to me. I loop around the front of the cottage and head toward town with a confident raised chin and no-nonsense pace. It's a long walk,

especially without music or an audiobook to keep me company. Alone with my thoughts? No thank you!

Immediately, my mind jumps back to the haircut: Nate's scent...his blue gaze following my every move...his clenched jaw.

Enough of that! I tell myself. I'm exploring the English countryside! I'm going on an adventure!

Never mind that it's slightly colder than I first anticipated and this godforsaken puffer jacket is the worst article of clothing I've ever purchased. It's fine though. I only have nearly fifty minutes to go. Nate said it's an hour's walk into town, right?

What else can I think about aside from Nate's fantastic body?

Oh right! My future with Andrew. There's a safe space to dwell in. I can picture exactly what he's up to today—or will be up to once the sun rises in New York. He'll brew his morning cup and start mainlining it before he showers. He'll pick from an array of button-down shirts hanging in his closet and choose the least outlandish one, all white or one with subtle blue stripes. He'll be the first one in the office and he'll be the last one to leave. He'll order takeout for dinner, maybe that Italian place around the corner from his apartment or, if he's willing to go slightly out of his way, Thai Fresh.

The question of whether or not I miss him has a complicated answer. I miss the fact that when I sat down at a table with him, he didn't put me on a ten-minute timer then up and leave when the conversation turned to a topic he didn't like. Andrew is dependable and respectful, and I decide I'm going to give him a call when I get into town (hopefully sometime this century).

This walk is taking forever. I'm beginning to worry I'm on a hero's quest in which there is no town. Sedbergh never existed and I will have to continue walking until my soles wear out and my knees buckle.

This horrible thought has fully taken hold when, *finally*, I see a little sign off the side of the road: *Sedbergh - 1 kilometer*. I have no idea how kilometers translate to miles because I was absent that day in elementary school, but one of anything can't be that bad. Surely, I can do one.

Then I see it! Buildings on the horizon line, houses sprinkled through the countryside. Rolling hills, melting snow, and grazing sheep give way to the tiny town I've been hunting for since the start of my trek. The accomplishment of the walk washes over me. I've done a thing! I walked here on my own and now the sky's the limit. Well, sort of. I do need a restroom. I downed that coffee back at the cottage and now my bladder is at max capacity. I considered peeing behind a yew tree back there, but a herd of dairy cows lingered nearby, judging me.

Salvation comes in the form of Main Street Books, the first shop I find with its lights on. A paper sign hanging in the window reads *Open*, and I don't even think twice before I open the door and ding the bell overhead as I enter.

The smell. Oh god, it's good—the musk of old books. My heart flutters as I look around the small shop and its neat layout. Against the wall, there are shelves brimming with books arranged by genre. In the center, round tables are topped with merchandise and special selections. Near the back, there are rare books displayed in locked glass cases.

I'm studying them when, from a doorway in the back, I hear a voice call out. "Morning! Sorry, we just opened." Then Alice walks out in black corduroy overalls layered over a chunky knit sweater, a cup of coffee in her hand. She sees me, and I can tell it takes her a moment to piece together who I am. "Oh. *Hi*."

I knew this was Alice's shop, but I wasn't sure she would be the person to greet me. Then again, she might be the only person working here. I can't imagine it turns a big enough profit to accommodate a large staff.

"Morning." I wave shyly, trying to force my bladder into compliance. It's like it can sense that I'm near a toilet and now it screams at me to FIND IT! NOW! *HURRY!*

“I would love to shop, but I’ve been on a walk and…” I cut to the chase. “Do you happen to have a restroom I could use?”

Realization dawns and she laughs and steps aside, making way for the door behind her. “Yes, straight through here. Ignore the clutter. My office is a total mess.”

I barely register her office on my way in, but after I’ve used the restroom, I sneak a peek. She wasn’t exaggerating; it is messy, but in a well-loved way. There’s an oversized wooden desk housing an ancient desktop computer. *Oh my god, I bet that thing runs Windows 95.* Beside it there are stacks of papers, pens, and an old coffee cup. Boxes are tucked in the corner beside her desk. A gift-wrap station doubles as a spot to catalog inventory. Near the door that leads out, there’s a row of framed photos hanging on the wall. One is of a small girl standing beside an older woman. They’re hand in hand, standing in front of Main Street Books.

When I walk back out into the shop, I find Alice at the checkout counter, boxing up an order. The book is already wrapped in tissue paper and tied with a red velvet ribbon.

“You have a beautiful store,” I tell her, a bit envious of her setup. “Your grandmother opened it, you said?”

She looks up and smiles. “Yeah, almost thirty years ago.”

“Was it always the plan for you to take it over for her?”

She puffs out a breath, her forehead scrunching with frustration as she considers the question. “No, actually. Not *at all*. I was an in-house accountant at an oil and gas company in California. I assumed that was what I would do forever, but then my grandmother got sick and…” She shrugs, and her brown eyes lock with mine. “Long story short, I left it all behind to come here and help take care of her. She’s better now, but she can’t run the shop like she used to.”

“I’m sure she’s proud you’ve stepped in.”

She forces a laugh. “You mind telling that to my mom? She insists I’m wasting my time over here.”

I'm hit with a wave of sympathy. "I'm sorry. Family can be tough."

She must sense that I speak from experience because her smile gentles, her eyes soften. In a way, I'm no longer the enemy.

"So you're working with Nathaniel?" she asks, setting aside her task to reach for her coffee. She must not be in too much of a rush this morning. "Does that mean you're with his publisher?"

"Yes, I'm a newly minted editor with InkWell. Just started actually."

Her eyebrows rise in surprise. "And you're already working with Nathaniel? That's a big deal."

It strikes me then that everyone calls him Nathaniel—InkWell employees, Martin, Alice—but he gave me permission to call him Nate. Why?

"I guess so. We'll see if I'm actually successful at it."

She nods, and then her gaze sweeps across the store. "Well, let me know if I can help you shop for anything. You might be my only customer today."

"Really?"

"Yeah." She doesn't seem troubled. "These are the lean months, but it picks up a lot in the spring and summer. They're talking about adding a festival in late fall that would help bring more people in that time of year as well."

"And you do e-commerce on the side?" I ask, pointing to the book she was wrapping.

She looks down. "Yes, a lot here lately. Buyers are more interested than ever in collecting rare books, so that's been good for business too. My grandmother built a really large antiquarian collection."

I wonder if it's all housed in the cases near the back or if that's only part of it.

"Very cool. And do you live nearby?"

I'm curious how anyone does it here. Are they all living like Nate? Off the grid, chopping wood and stacking rocks for fun?

She points up with a lopsided smile, like she's slightly embarrassed to reveal the answer. "Second-story apartment."

No way.

"Does it smell like books up there?" I ask with unabashed wonder.

She laughs. "Oh yeah."

I groan. "A dream! You're living my *dream!*"

She blushes. "I mean, it's good yeah, but it has its ups and downs. Not much in the way of a social life here."

"Right. I can imagine that's tough."

"I go into Kendal a lot. I have a group of friends there. A guy I dated for a while."

I can't help but push the subject. "And Nathaniel?"

For some reason, I don't want her to know I call him Nate. It feels...special. Which is dumb, and I refuse to hold up a magnifying glass to the feeling. Better to glaze over it altogether.

"Nathaniel is a friend, yeah. Insofar as he can be." She scrunches her nose. "He's quiet."

I roll my eyes exaggeratedly. "Tell me about it."

"And a little...closed off," she adds.

I bark out a laugh. "Oh my god, yes. I needed this. A Nathaniel Foster support group." I raise my hand. "Sign me up."

She laughs. "Has he been tough to work with?"

I level her with a glare that says, *What do you think?*

"I can imagine. Yeah."

I swallow and study her, thinking maybe it wouldn't be too awkward if I asked...

“Have you two dated or anything? Sorry if that’s too personal. I just thought—”

Her eyes widen like she’s been caught red-handed.

“Me and Nathaniel?” She clears her throat and looks down, fidgets with the package on the counter, and then finally sighs. “Yeah, I mean. We’ve...kind of gone there. But it was a while ago.”

“Ah.”

Her brown eyes look up, worry-filled now that she’s been honest.

“I won’t bring it up with him,” I promise. “I was just curious. The dating scene must be tough.”

“We’re not totally lacking eligible men.” I arch a brow, prompting her to laugh and continue, “I mean it! There are a few. Nathaniel’s not the only good-looking guy around here.”

Sure, but even still. Nate has to be a cut above the rest. He’s a ten, the total package. Drop him in New York City and the women would turn rabid.

The phone on the counter rings and she shoots me an apologetic glance before reaching for it. “Main Street Books. Alice speaking.”

I motion that I’m going to shop while she deals with the customer on the phone, and then I spend a few minutes browsing the shelves. Back at the cottage, Nate has more than enough reading material to keep me occupied, but I want to support Alice’s shop. I settle on a cozy mystery then grab a Main Street Books tote bag as well. It’s more expensive than I would like, but I’m too embarrassed to say anything after Alice rings it up, so I just hand over my card and cry a little inside.

“Thanks for stopping in.” Alice passes over my book tucked in my new bag.

“Thanks for letting me use your bathroom.”

She laughs. “Anytime. Let me know if I can be helpful with Nathaniel or if you want to hang out while you’re in

town. Actually, you know what? A few of us are meeting for an early dinner tonight. Do you have plans? Why don't you join?"

Plans? With who? The dog and the cat?

"Yes!" I respond, a little too enthusiastically. Then I tone it down as I add, "That'd be great."

She jots down the details for me before I leave.

Back out on the street, I check my phone. Now that I have cell service, all the cumulated texts I've missed over the last day are piled up. I'm expecting hundreds. Y'know, friends in the city wanting to meet up for coffee, loads of people wondering where I am.

Come out with us!

Let's hang!

Where have you been, girl?!

In reality, I only have three texts waiting for me. One from my mom, one from Andrew, and one from a spam number urging me to check my car's extended warranty. I don't even own a car.

My mom wants a progress report and an update for how things are going in England. *I worry about you being so far away and without reliable cell service. This just seems like a recipe for disaster, Summer. I don't see why you couldn't have stayed in New York.*

Andrew is shocked as well.

I can't believe you're in England. I tried calling you a few times but none of them have gone through. When you get this, call me back. Day or night, it doesn't matter. I'd like to hear from you and I'm glad you texted me.

I head down the street. My eventual goal is to make it down to the grocery store Nate took me to yesterday, but I'm in no rush. All of a sudden, I have plans later and I need to kill time. There's a lone coffee shop on Main Street that's open. A few people are gathered around a table talking, and when I walk in, they look at me as if I have two heads. From

everything I've heard, it's rare to see a tourist here in the dead of winter. One of the women sitting at the table stands to take my order. I get a cappuccino then settle into a secluded spot in the corner.

Better than the coffee, the shop has reliable internet. *Oh my god! I can check my email!*

There's music playing over the speakers, and the conversation near the front of the shop is lively enough that I don't feel bad calling Andrew. I half-expect he won't answer, but he does on the second ring.

"Summer. Hey."

It feels good to hear his voice. Losing Andrew as a boyfriend has come second to losing Andrew as a friend. I didn't realize how much I was missing him until now. A pang of homesickness nearly steals my voice.

"Hi." I force the word out.

"England, huh?"

I smile. "England, yeah. How's New York?"

He laughs. "Who cares about New York? Where are you?"

"The North Pole." I laugh. "No really, I'm in a winter wonderland snow globe village. It's crazy."

"And you're there for work? For an author? I don't understand. Since when do editors fly overseas to work with authors? I thought it was a mostly remote job."

"It's a long story..."

The barista who took my order delivers my cappuccino to my table, and I mouth a thank you to her.

"Right. Do you have any idea when you're coming back?" Andrew asks.

"Well, it depends on the project. InkWell didn't give me a specific timeline."

"That's strange." When I don't agree, he prods me. "Don't you think that's strange?"

I rub the back of my neck. “It’s just a unique circumstance with this author.”

“What’s she like?”

Oh.

“Umm, he’s fine.”

Andrew isn’t the jealous type. Learning the author I’m working with is a man doesn’t even faze him. “Do I know him? Probably not. You know me, I stick mostly with non-fiction.”

“I’m not sure if I’m allowed to say. It’s not like a secret or anything.” I’m aware of the group sitting at the front of the shop, but none of them are paying me any attention. “It’s Nathaniel Foster, the guy who—”

“*What?!*”

I laugh nervously.

“Summer, that’s wild. Wow.”

“I haven’t done anything yet. Don’t sound so impressed.”

“Impossible. I mean, he’s a household name. How’d you get put on that project?”

I don’t want to tell him the truth: that I’m InkWell’s last resort. It’ll make the whole thing sound less important than it is, and this is the first time ever that Andrew has seemed supportive of my job. Up until now, he’s been on my family’s side.

It has always been Summer vs. everyone, especially during college. I was on track and studying pre-med, filling my schedule with organic chemistry and anatomy. I was definitely not supposed to be sneaking in English classes, joining writing clubs, fantasizing about majoring in something like art history or philosophy.

By my junior year, everyone was fed up with me. Emma sat me down at Thanksgiving while my mom was slow-roasting the turkey and making sous vide carrots and other culinary masterpieces. We went into the other room, Emma

holding a glass of red wine delicately in her hand, never at all scared that she might drop it on my parents' priceless silk rug.

Andrew sat beside her, not me. I sat on the couch opposite them. I still remember the feeling of being on my own, a little confused about why we needed to have a serious talk right then. As soon as Emma began, I realized she was stepping in on behalf of everyone, that while my mom and dad and brother weren't in the room with us, they were in agreement with everything she was saying.

"We're mainly concerned with your inability to commit to anything, Summer. You've changed your major a hundred times. You dropped your pre-med pre-reqs. You're the only person I know flighty enough to sign up for introduction to archeology with no plan at all to be an archeologist!"

I flinched at her tone, instantly feeling defensive. "Well I-I read that interesting book about how they excavated the Roman church beneath the Duomo in Florence. It was fascinating..."

"Fascinating, right." She looked to Andrew for backup. My boyfriend was her accomplice in this. "Summer...it's time to do something. *Decide.*"

"I'm considering going into creative writing, maybe working in publishing or even trying to—"

She sighed heavily, cutting me off.

Emma knew I kept journals, knew I excelled in my creative writing courses. At this confession though, she winced.

"The fairy tales and writing don't have to disappear completely," she told me. "I don't want you to think you should change altogether. Truly, I love that you enjoy writing! Just try to get serious about your future. Once I'm done with residency, I'm going to have a great work-life balance at the practice—benefits, time off, a retirement plan. I get to help women, and I feel really good about what I do."

"So you don't regret going into medicine?" I asked tentatively.

It wasn't that I hated the idea of a career like hers; I was just confused.

"No. Never. I know it's what I'm supposed to do."

Her conviction was contagious. "So you think I should stick with medicine too? Apply to grad school or something?"

Her eyes brightened with relief. Maybe she'd thought it was going to be harder to convince me to come around. "Yes. I work with amazing physician assistants. You would be great in that role. In the meantime, I can try to get you a summer job. Working as a scribe would look really good on applications. Your grades are fine, and I can help you study for the GRE."

She was so convinced of the plan I couldn't help but agree to go along with it, if only so I could enjoy the rest of Thanksgiving without having to worry about everyone being mad at me. And though I didn't love the way she'd laid it out there, she had a point. I needed to get serious about my future.

After college, I worked with Emma and got my ducks in a row to apply to PA programs around the country. Andrew and my family were so proud of me. I can remember the day I finished my PA school interviews, they took me out to a fancy dinner, celebrating as if it was a foregone conclusion that I would soon be drowning in acceptance letters.

At the time, none of them knew that I'd *also* applied to liberal arts programs. On the side, I had interviewed at Columbia, Stanford, and Rutgers to pursue a career in literature, not medicine. I didn't keep it a secret from everyone because I was trying to be sneaky. I truly had no idea which path I wanted to take. Medicine made so much sense. I would have a great job and a great life. I would help people and I would make my family happy. All the Collinses would be medical professionals. What an accomplishment for my parents.

But still, in the back of my mind, I couldn't quite give up on pursuing a different path. I was undecided, getting pushed and pulled in either direction right up until the day I checked my mail and held my acceptance letter to Columbia graduate school in my shaking hands.

Suddenly, I knew with absolute clarity what I wanted to do. I planned to accept my place at Columbia and get my master's in English and comparative literature, but I was too scared to tell my family. Andrew too. No one knew I'd even considered applying to other graduate schools. Sharing my new plan was going to tear through the close-knit fabric of our family; I knew it, and that's why I avoided it for so long.

When everyone asked me about admissions, I'd change the subject, mention delays, shrug and move on. Eventually, it became clear that something was wrong, and I asked Emma to meet me at a coffee shop by her work. I wanted to talk to her one on one, and I hoped she would help me share the news with everyone else. I needed her to be an ally in a way I knew might be impossible for her.

She walked in wearing her scrubs, her blonde hair swept up in a neat ponytail. Emma has always been beautiful and perfectly put together. I can't remember a time when I didn't envy her for that.

She put in her usual order with the barista, a soy latte, and then came over to give me a hug.

When she drew back, she winked. "You heard back, didn't you?"

Her enthusiasm radiated off her, sparking in her green eyes.

"Umm..." I cleared my throat. "Yes."

"Well?! Where are you going? I can't believe you aren't jumping up and down right now."

I let her take the seat across from me then I held my Columbia letter out for her to take. With a squeal, she yanked it out of my hand. She smiled, and smiled, and smiled as she read, and then I watched that smile slowly dissolve, confusion taking over, then...anger. She handed the letter back to me without a word, looking over to see if her drink was ready yet at the bar.

My eyelids burned and I looked away, knowing I wouldn't recover if this went south.

“Do Mom and Dad know?” she asked matter-of-factly.

I shook my head.

“Does Andrew?”

I could barely swallow past the lump in my throat. “No.”

She looked at me sadly. “I won’t tell you you’re making a mistake. It’s your life. It’s just really frustrating. I took a lot of time away from my family to help you study for the GRE and prep your applications. Was that all a joke to you?”

“*No!*”

Her frustration rang through every word. “I mean, why not just tell me you were going to apply to other programs?”

Guilt hit me like a heavy anvil, constricting my chest.

“I’m sorry about all of this. I didn’t mean to waste your time,” I said in a rush, worried my voice would crack and the tears would come and never stop. “I just didn’t know how to tell you guys.”

The next few weeks were some of the toughest in my entire life.

Andrew broke up with me the first time over that Columbia letter. When I showed it to him later that night, he felt just as betrayed as Emma had. He felt like by keeping this secret from him, I’d lied, and he took Emma’s side, blaming me for wasting her time. We had a huge blow-up fight, him accusing me of being a different person, someone he didn’t fully recognize anymore. We didn’t talk for three months.

My family was mad at me, Andrew was nowhere to be found, and I was totally on my own the day I started graduate school at Columbia.

They didn’t come around overnight either. In fact, I’m not sure I’ll ever be fully forgiven for changing career paths in the 11th hour. It’s such a complicated mess, the fact that I chose to do something outside of medicine, the fact that I kept the truth from them for so long. They take it as a personal betrayal that I don’t want what they want.

So it's astounding to hear Andrew excited about me being in England for work.

"I talked to Emma yesterday, at Dave's birthday dinner," he tells me now. "You remember him? He went to college with Lincoln and me."

"Oh yeah? That's nice."

"It was good to see her."

Emma's husband, Lincoln, grew up with Andrew. They're the reason Andrew and I met, and even after years of dating Andrew off and on, it still feels like there is Emma and Lincoln and Andrew, and then there's me, on the outside of their friend group looking in.

"She was confused about why you were in England," he admits.

"I emailed her about it," I say, sounding more defensive than I'd like. I just hate feeling like Andrew isn't on my side when it comes to my sister.

"Yeah, she mentioned that. I guess maybe you didn't tell her much about what you're doing there though?"

I picture them standing together talking about me at the dinner party. I don't know why it bothers me so much.

"There's only so much detail I can go into."

He chuckles. "I know, hey. I told her what I knew, and she seemed impressed. How have things been with you two?"

Ever since that day at the coffee shop, Emma has kept me at arm's length, and it still bothers me. It feels like a long, drawn-out punishment when she doesn't return my phone calls or when she responds tersely to my text messages. I've apologized to her countless times, trying to break through this weird tension between us. Still, it just doesn't seem to be enough.

I don't want to tell Andrew the real truth of it though, because I'm worried he'll judge me for the current state of our relationship and blame me for the disrepair.

“It’s good. You know how it is, she’s so busy and now I’m here...”

Sensing that I’m uncomfortable, he changes the subject, telling me about a new hire at his firm who’s made a horrible impression with their boss. It feels good to talk about mundane life stuff with him. We don’t address our relationship or lack thereof, but even still, when I hang up, I’m left staring down at my phone with so much turmoil. I’m not even sure exactly where it stems from: me missing Andrew, me missing home, my anger with Emma and my family, my hopelessness pertaining to Nate and this project—the threads are all tied together in a knot, impossible to pick apart.

The feeling hangs over my head the rest of the afternoon. I stay at the coffee shop for a while then I bundle myself back up and head down toward the grocery store. Martin is behind the counter watching football. He nods at me when I walk in.

“Alright?”

It’s like we’re old friends now.

I nod and make my way to the candy section where I grab a Cadbury chocolate bar off the shelf. Then I think better of it and grab four more. Can I afford to go on an all-out chocolate buying spree? Not exactly, but I need something to help smooth the waters with Nate when I get home.

CHAPTER 11

SUMMER

I'M the first person to arrive for dinner after killing time in Sedbergh all day. I popped into every shop that was open on Main Street, met a few locals, and, not to brag, but I could now give tourists newer than me semi-accurate directions if prompted.

The Dalesman Country Inn is exactly as its name promises. In the summertime, you can stay in one of their ten rooms. This time of year, they only open their small restaurant and bar once a day for the dinner crowd. It's decorated like a country pub, a lot of wood and low lighting, candles burning on the tables. There's a rustic charm to it that I immediately love. Aside from a few tables crammed close together, the room is dominated by a long bar. Two men occupy one end of it, sitting on stools and talking animatedly with the bartender behind the counter. He nods at me and I wave.

"Meeting friends," I tell him.

"Nab any table."

I'm not sure how many people will be joining Alice and me, so I get the biggest table there is just as she walks in alongside a couple.

"Summer! You made it."

I'm relieved that she seems happy to see me. I wasn't sure if her invitation earlier was born out of pity. I worried she didn't really expect me to take her up on it, but she gives me a warm hug then introduces her friends.

“This is Freya and Mike. Guys, this is Summer.”

“Summer, hi.”

Freya reaches me first, wrapped up in a lovely camel-colored sweater that looks nice and cozy. She has beautiful hair, wild red corkscrew curls that bounce any time she moves. Her face is freckled and sweet. Mike is a huge guy with buzzed blond hair and a rugby sweatshirt that I suspect belongs to a team he used to play for. He definitely has the build for it. He proudly introduces himself as Freya’s boyfriend, which earns a big smile from Alice.

She looks to me and jokingly rolls her eyes. “Took them forever to get together. I’m still getting used to it. Have you ordered a drink yet?”

“No, just got here and I was going to claim this table. Is it big enough?”

“It’s great.”

We each take a seat, and Alice suggests sharing a bottle of wine. Mike opts for a lager, and the bartender has just come around with a bottle of cabernet and three glasses when we’re joined by Oliver, Mike’s younger brother. He claims the seat to my left. He’s the antithesis of Mike, tall and spindly, though their hair matches down to the ultra-short buzz cut.

“Where were you studying?” I ask him once I find out he just graduated from university.

“London.”

I’m sure my face betrays my envy. “I can’t imagine going to school in London. I doubt I’d even manage to go to class.”

Oliver scrunches his nose. “It was alright. None of my mates were there. Hated the whole scene, really. I’ve lived up here my whole life and couldn’t wait to get back.”

“Mike and Oliver help their parents,” Alice supplies, helping to guide me so I don’t feel lost among all the new faces. “They own a massive farm, lots of sheep and cows. You might have seen part of it, actually—”

Alice stops talking when something catches her attention over my shoulder.

I turn to check and lock eyes with Nate coming in out of the cold. He's still wearing his cream cable knit sweater and navy pants, though now there's a green hunter-style jacket layered on top and nice brown boots. I feel his presence immediately, in the tugging in my stomach, in the sudden lurch of my heart in my chest. He sees me and freezes, frowning as he makes sense of the scene he's walked in on.

The gang all greets him like they were expecting him, which maybe they were. Maybe I'm the only last-minute addition.

"Nathaniel, you know Summer, I assume?" Alice asks, her voice full of sarcasm, once Nate passes by without addressing me.

He gives me a curt nod as an afterthought, which makes Alice raise her brows at me like, *What's up his butt?*

He walks to the other side and claims the seat at the head of the table across from me, between Alice and Freya. Though to be fair, there was no room for him down here with Oliver and Mike on either side of me.

"Have you ordered yet?" he asks the group. "I'm starving."

"Just got here. Relax, will you?" Mike turns to address the bartender. "Oy, Arthur, get this bloke a lager, will you?"

Arthur motions with his hand to let Mike know he heard him. Meanwhile, I'm watching Nate as he takes off his jacket and hangs it on the back of his chair. He tugs up the sleeves of his sweater, revealing his toned forearms, and then after sitting, he finally looks at me.

His blue eyes are glacial.

My spine straightens and I look away immediately, reaching for my wine glass.

Unfortunately for Nate, if he was hoping to pretend I'm not here, it doesn't work out so well for him. Seeing as I'm the only new person, most of the questions are aimed at me.

Oliver keeps asking about what it was like growing up in the States.

“*Hello*, I’m from America too,” Alice points out with a laugh. “So is Nathaniel.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. I’m trying to be friendly,” Oliver says, his ears going pink with embarrassment.

“Well why don’t you just get on with the question you *really* want to ask,” Alice says before he cuts her off.

“Oh, sorry.” Oliver shakes his head. “Can’t believe it took me so long.” Then he looks at me dead serious as he asks, “Are you single?”

“*No*, you fool.” Alice laughs. “Not that!”

“That’s not what she meant,” Freya groans, dropping her head in her hands.

The table laughs and Mike pushes Oliver’s shoulder, nearly toppling his brother out of his chair.

When everyone settles down, Alice leans in. “Aren’t any of you curious how Nathaniel and Summer know each other?”

“Whatever is going on, they’ve clearly had a row. He won’t even look at her,” Mike says, pointing his lager at Nate.

“I’ve looked at her,” Nate says, his voice devoid of any real annoyance, but he doesn’t meet my gaze.

“Summer is working with Nathaniel!” Alice erupts. “And living with him!”

The table goes dead silent. I can’t look at Nate for fear of what my face might reveal.

“You’re *living* with him?!” Freya asks me.

“Who would want to live with that asshole?” Mike asks. “No offense, mate.”

Nate rolls his eyes and drinks his beer. It’s like this whole conversation is beneath him. His aloofness is driving me insane. I want to rile him up and get a real reaction, like when he storms out of the cottage all in a huff. I wonder if he’s ever

shown that part of himself to this group. They probably think he's always cool, calm, and collected, but there's another side to him, passionate and intense.

"If he kicks you out, you can come live with me," Oliver says with a smile.

"I'm not kicking her out." Nate's tone is admonishing. "Now are you all done? I'm hungry and I'm putting in my order."

He pushes away from the table and heads over to the bar without waiting for any of us to join him. Everyone raises their eyebrows, glancing around the group like, *Uh-oh, we made Daddy mad.*

I shouldn't smile, but I can't help it! It's nice to be around people who understand Nate. I should pick their brain for ways to get through to him. Maybe they'd have some good insight. The more surly and quiet he is, the more I want to make him laugh. He's so serious!

Alice and the guys stand to order, and seeing as how I've been talking instead of looking over the menu, I have no idea what I want to eat. I ask Alice if she wouldn't mind ordering for me just as Nate arrives back at the table to reclaim his spot. "I already got her order," he tells Alice.

Oh.

"Thank you," I say, a little taken aback.

He doesn't even nod to let me know he's heard me. I think that's going to be it, he's going to go back to being quiet and aloof the rest of dinner, but then he looks up, his eyes capturing mine before they narrow. "Where were you today?"

I'm conscious of Freya's presence at the table, but she's focused down on her phone as if she's not paying us any attention. *Doubtful.*

"I came into town."

The wrinkle between his brow deepens. "How?"

"I walked," I say with a light laugh.

“You should have told me.”

“You were busy.”

Need I remind him of the rocks? Just how many did he stack today instead of working on his manuscript?

Nate’s jaw ticks, and I can tell I’m frustrating him. Big deal! It’s not like it’s hard. Every minute of every day I seem to frustrate him. My mere existence is enough to send him over the edge.

“Next time, I’ll let you know,” I tack on, aware of the group heading back this way. I want to resolve things as best as possible or the rest of this evening is going to be horrible. You know, more than it already has been.

While we settle in and wait for our food, Mike throws his arm over the back of Freya’s chair in a quiet claim. She smiles and he winks before leaning in to kiss her on the side of the mouth.

I love how relaxed they are with each other. I’ve been around loving partners before, of course. Emma and Lincoln are so restrained though. Even my parents are pretty careful about PDA, and Andrew? Ha. I can’t recall him *ever* kissing me in public.

Would I even *want* him to?

My gaze slips to Nate’s profile. He’s looking out the window at the snow that’s coming down again. We’ve been without it for all of half a day and now it’s back with a vengeance.

“Did you get a haircut, Nathaniel?” Alice asks, drawing his attention back to the group.

“This morning” is all Nate says in reply, his gaze holding mine only for a brief moment. Maybe he doesn’t want to admit that he let me cut it. Who knows how this group would react to *that* revelation. I’m sure Mike would have a comment or two.

“’Bout time,” Mike adds with a chuckle.

Oliver turns to me and smiles, leaning in close while the group moves on to talking about something else.

“He’s not usually like this.”

My raised brow gives away how little I believe that.

“Not this quiet, I mean.”

I must bring it out of him, I think. Oh joy.

Plates arrive from the kitchen, and I was half-right to expect all the standard pub food, but it’s been done with a twist. Fish and chips, venison steak, butternut squash risotto—all plated to perfection as if we’re being served in a Michelin-starred restaurant. What kind of foodie rabbit hole have I fallen into? Alice got the vegan ragu with aubergine and green lentils, and it looks like a work of art on her plate.

She notices my reaction, namely the fact that my mouth is opening and closing like a guppy.

“On top of Sedbergh being a Book Town, it’s also known for a few special restaurants.”

“This is one of them. The tourists demanded it,” Oliver says, his mouth full of steak. “They wanted nice places to eat at while they’re here for the festivals.”

“During the winter months, they work on their tasting menus,” Freya adds.

“And we get to be the lucky blokes who try it all out. You going to eat that?” Mike asks, already aiming his fork at Oliver’s meal.

Oliver picks up his plate before Mike can reach it. “Mate, I will stab your hand if you get any closer.”

“Oy! Don’t be stingy.”

“Eat your own sodding food!”

Nate ordered me the lamb shank, which, according to the menu (I review it because I want to know what I’m about to eat) comes with carrot, swede & celeriac puree, and red wine jus. He ordered the same thing for himself, and for the first time all night, he’s not shy about looking at me. He keeps careful watch as I take my first bite.

The words “Oh my god” come sputtering out of my mouth before I’ve even swallowed.

He nods. “It’s good, right?”

“Heaven! This is *heaven!*”

“Let me try it,” Oliver says.

“Oliver, let her eat.” Alice laughs.

“No, actually that’s fine. Here, have some, but I want to try some of yours too.”

We all end up sharing. Apparently, the lamb has been on the menu for a while, but the vegan ragu and butternut squash risotto are new. The bartender—who I learn is the chef’s husband—comes around to ask our opinions. I’m absolutely no help as I only have gushing reviews to give him about everything.

My mom would love this place.

Well, she would love the food. I’m not sure she’d love the atmosphere; a cozy country pub isn’t exactly bougie enough for Patricia Collins. She wants a fancy restaurant nestled between an Hermès store and the Eiffel Tower.

After we’re finished, we sit and drink our wine.

“Freya, I never asked, what do you do for work?”

She smiles tightly and looks down. Right away, I realize maybe it would have been better if I didn’t ask. “Between jobs at the moment, actually. I was working with my mum and stepdad. They own the grocery store down the way.”

“Martin’s store?” I ask, taking a gamble that I happen to know what shop she’s referring to. It’s not like there are *that* many in Sedbergh.

Freya smiles. “Yeah, that’s it.”

“Really cool. I’ve been in a few times now. I really like it.”

She nods. “Yeah, it’s not that I don’t like helping out. It’s just, I’d like to go back and study graphic design. Folks around

here are always looking for someone who's handy with computers. It's tough though, hard to find the time."

"Freya's a single mum," Mike says proudly. "Jack's just turned three."

"Oh! I have a niece about that age. I can imagine you have your hands full."

She nods exaggeratedly. "You can't keep track of him. I mean, I swear he's in one room then the next second, he's clear across the house. It's nonstop all bloody day. You'd think I load him up on sweets, but it's just the way he is!"

"He gives me a run for my money," Mike adds with a little chuff.

Freya bumps her shoulder into his, smiling up at him. "Mike's good with him though."

I'm watching them with a lazy smile, enjoying how sweet they are with each other.

Nate finishes the last of his beer, drops it on the table, and stands. "Summer, you ready?"

Oh.

Right.

I hadn't even considered the fact that he'd be driving me home. Now that I think of it, I'm not sure how I planned to get home without Nate. It's dark outside and I have no flashlight other than the tiny one on my phone. I suppose I could have asked Alice for a ride, assuming she has a car, but well...I have no choice but to stand.

"Yes, right. Okay."

I make sure to grab my bags and offer to pay, but apparently, Nate's already taken care of it. He's covered everyone's dinner, actually. It's kind and the group thanks him, but he clears his throat like the whole thing makes him a little uncomfortable.

As I do my round of goodbyes, I ask Freya to see a picture of Jack. She's scrolling through an endless album of photos on

her phone when Nate touches my elbow.

“I’m worried about the snow. Let’s set out.”

“Yes, yes. Sorry.”

Alice comes over to give me a hug, and I thank her quickly for inviting me to dinner.

“Of course. Don’t be a stranger. It was nice having another girl around. The testosterone gets to be a bit much with this group.”

I laugh, but I don’t promise to see her again, because frankly I’m not sure what’s about to happen. With Nate’s mood so hard to discern, there’s a chance I’ll never see this lovely group of people again. What a shame that’d be. I can’t remember the last time I had such a nice dinner, Nate’s sulking aside...

Outside, he walks a few yards in front of me, heading for his car like he’s on a mission to leave me behind. I clench my jaw and pick up my pace. I’m forced to rush after him even though the sidewalk is slick with ice and snow. My boots slip out from underneath me once, but I recover. Now he’s even farther ahead, and if only he’d slow down—

The second time my boots lose traction, I’m not so lucky. I land on the ground with a graceless “*Oomph*,” splayed out like a starfish. If there’s pain—blood, guts, those sorts of things—it takes a back seat to my embarrassment.

I tilt my head to the left to see my bags have spilled open. The book I bought at Alice’s shop today is now soaked through and ruined. My bottom lip wobbles.

Nate rushes back, his face coming over mine. He’s nice again, the Nate underneath the hard exterior, all that concealed emotion evident in his blue eyes. “Are you okay?”

I can’t look at him. I squeeze my eyes closed. “Uh-huh.”

“How did you land? On your elbow?”

On my butt. It will bruise, as will my ego, but everything else is fine. Unfortunately. How nice would a mild concussion be right now? Amnesia, even!

“Can you get up?” he asks gently.

I don't want to. I want to lie on these cold uneven cobblestones until I freeze into a solid block of ice.

Nate bends down to take hold of my upper arms, hoisting me up until I'm standing and dripping. Melted snow covers the back half of my body. My hair is soaked.

He keeps his hands on my arms, steadying me like he's worried I'll topple over again. He leans down, his eyes level with mine. He's wincing now. “Sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. I should have helped you to the car.”

My embarrassment morphs into indignation in the blink of an eye. I yank my arms out of his hold and scowl at him. “Yes, you should have, instead of acting like a jerk huffing and puffing all night. Is it that big of a deal that I ate dinner with your friends? I was perfectly good company. You were the one sulking all night!”

The apology in his eyes disappears in an instant. Suddenly, we're adversaries again.

He bends to collect my things and shoves it all back into my bags. I want him to go away, but when we start to walk, he stays right by me, making sure if I go down, he'll be close enough to catch me. Little does he know, if I'm going down, I'm taking him down with me. Oh, and those chocolate bars I bought earlier, yeah...*he's not getting any of them!*

We ride home in tense silence. My arms stay crossed over my chest. My left butt cheek throbs with a dull ache. I think we'll continue on like this the whole night, stomping around upstairs in the cottage while we brush our teeth, trying to outdo the other person in this childish game of anger.

I'm prepared to continue, raring to go even, except when we walk into his home, Nate yanks off his jacket, turns to me, and points to the kitchen table.

“Sit down,” he demands.

CHAPTER 12

NATE

SUMMER SEARS me with her eyes as she rounds the table and takes a seat as far away from me as she can get. Still, her arms are crossed. Her eyebrows are furrowed. Her hair is as wild and untamed as I've ever seen it, damp from the snow, cascading down around her. I look at her, she looks back at me, and I feel a tug in my chest.

Before I know it, I'm talking. "I told you about my old editor, that she left InkWell after the release of *Echo of Hope*..."

Summer doesn't say anything. She doesn't soften her expression or make this any easier, and why should she? I've been an asshole all evening.

I consider taking the seat across from her, leveling the playing field, but I'm scared if I move or change course, this confession will dry up and disappear.

"She is the only reason I could publish *Echo of Hope*. She was influential in helping me plot and write, and she was by my side through the entire thing, more so than a normal editor would be. I'm terrified my ability to create is intrinsically tied to her. I haven't written at all since she left."

There. I've said it.

This heavy truth has sat like a boulder on my chest for years.

Summer's frown deepens, not with sympathy but with disbelief. And maybe because I've already started, or maybe

because none of this feels real anyway, I keep going.

“If I start and fail, I’ll know *she* had the magic. If I fail to start, I get to live out the rest of my days never testing that theory. It’s Schrödinger’s cat.”

“What?” She shakes her head impatiently.

“The cat is both alive and dead in the box, right? I am both a great writer and a hack. I have enough money to live out the rest of my days without finishing my series. I never have to open the box.”

She stares at me with those cunning green eyes, absorbing this while I wait.

Then finally, she shakes her head again. “You’ve done a real number on yourself. Sheesh, you’ve really bought into this, haven’t you? First, you can’t write because of the expectations of your readers, the demands they’ve put on you...and *then*, as if that wasn’t enough to break your spirit, you’ve decided you’re nobody without some *editor*? Who cares about her?! She wasn’t with you when you wrote *The Last Exodus*. I *know* she wasn’t because you finished that book while you were still brave, still willing to try something new and go out on a limb. All of this Schrödinger’s cat nonsense —” She scoffs. “Were you always such a coward?”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, surely not, right? Surely at one point you were the man willing to walk away from his PhD program to pursue a career in writing, to quite literally RISK IT ALL, but now you won’t even pick up a pen?” She shakes her head in disgust.

“It’s not that simple.”

“Give back the money,” she insists with a sharp attitude.

“What?”

“Yeah, give it all back, everything you’ve earned from the entire series and then see what happens.” She stands up and slaps her hands down on the table. “That’s part of your problem! You’ve lost the desperation, the *hunger* you had as an aspiring author. The man living in a crappy apartment,

worried about how he'll manage to pay back his school loans and make rent next month." She points an accusing finger at me. "*He's* not worried about all this...this *bullshit*. He just wants to create, to *make something* that might pull him up out of the darkness. He wants to write a book that might mean something to one person, or if not to anyone else, to himself!"

"You have no idea what you're talking about," I snap, unwilling to bend even a little.

"Don't I?" She laughs caustically. "You and I aren't so different. You left your PhD program? I never even pursued mine. My family wanted me to go into medicine, just like them. I agreed to it, told them I'd applied and interviewed. I got accepted into every single school. Baylor, Tulane, Emory, Duke. And guess what? I changed course." She spits out the words with venom. "I went against my family and pissed everyone off because I was so *desperate* to pursue a career in writing." She opens her arms wide. "This is all I have: this job, this assignment with you. Nobody understands it. And to top it off, there's you! This—this closed-off jerk who only cares about himself!"

"Fuck off, Summer."

I can't believe I say it, but it's out there, and Summer doesn't wince at the words. She fights back.

"No, actually, you *fuck off*, Nate. God, pull your head out of your ass and wake up! Look around! You're the only enemy you have! Whatever you've convinced yourself of, whatever nonsense you've used to build a wall around your ego..." She pauses, breathing hard. "It's no longer serving you."

Our eyes lock in battle. This thing between us would burn us if we tried to touch it. *Fire*. No...*hotter*. Red-hot magma.

She shakes her head like she's through with me, and then she turns to stomp up the stairs.

"But what do I care?! Keep on living this way." Then quieter, when she's nearly upstairs, she mumbles to herself, "Schrödinger's cat, my ass."

It makes me smile despite myself.

I didn't think Summer had it in her—fighting words. She's so soft, feminine from her head to her toes, those delicate features and fair skin. It makes it all the more astounding to realize she's filled with passion. Though of course she is. I wouldn't be drawn to her otherwise.

I had to keep myself from staring at her at dinner. She enchanted us all. We listened to her talk, drawn to everything she had to say. Oliver, Mike, Freya, Alice—they weren't shy about their infatuation with her. She blended into the group seamlessly. I was the problem, the one with the sour attitude.

I reach into my cabinet near the sink, grab ahold of an old bottle of whiskey, and take a seat in my chair in front of the fire—the one that now smells like Summer.

Dog's gone. He wandered home just before I left for dinner, probably sensing the storm brewing in the cottage. I wish he were here now. He'd put his head on my lap and offer me some semblance of comfort, more than I have now at least, with nothing but my whiskey.

I shouldn't drink straight from the bottle, but there are a lot of things I'm currently doing that I shouldn't be. Namely, fantasizing about walking up those stairs and continuing this fight with Summer. Only I don't want to keep shouting at her. I never want to shout at her. I want to apologize for my words, the ones I said in the kitchen and the ones I can't seem to get down on paper.

I would do it for her, I realize.

I will.

In the morning, by the time Summer comes downstairs wearing an oversized sweater and leggings with fuzzy socks and freshly showered hair, I'm already sitting at the kitchen table.

“Coffee just finished brewing.”

She looks over at the pot with raised brows. It's true. I even put the kitten mug out for her to use.

“Get some and come sit down.”

“Going to pick up where we left off last night?” she asks with mild sarcasm. “Because I hate to break it to you, but I don’t have the energy this morning.”

“No.” I swallow, aware of my racing heart and the fact that I can only say this if my gaze is glued to the table. “I’d like to look over those notes you brought with you.”

Her head whips in my direction, and I glance up in time to witness unabashed hope light up her features. It’s gone too fast, replaced with skepticism.

“For ten minutes?” she asks drolly.

“No. We’ll work all morning. I need to do a few things this afternoon.”

She absorbs this with a slow, tentative nod before she walks over to get her coffee. When she’s filled up her mug and added a heaping amount of cream, she claims the seat across from me. Her booklet is still on the table where she left it yesterday.

“Before we begin, I’m sorry about last night,” she says, her eyes down on her mug.

“You have nothing to apologize for.”

“I used some...colorful words.”

“Fuck?”

Her gaze whips up to me and she smiles.

“Ass?”

She groans and covers her face with her hand. “Did I say that as well? I forgot that part. I did have two glasses of wine with dinner—I’d like to put that on record.”

“Let the official record reflect Summer’s two glasses of wine,” I say, as if talking to a court stenographer just to my left.

She laughs, and I feast on it.

My tone turns somber as I continue, “Also, what you said about your family...I’m sorry you’re in that position.”

“It doesn’t matter. They’ll come around eventually, them and Andrew.”

“Andrew?”

She startles as if surprised. “Oh, he’s the guy I’ve been dating the last few years. Not consistently, but yeah.” She cringes. “I guess it’s complicated.”

“And you two are together now?” I’d like clarity on that.

“No. We’ve agreed to see other people, but I spoke to him yesterday. He’s still in my life.”

“Have you seen other people?”

“Like gone on dates?” The idea amuses her, as if that could never happen. “No.”

Now I’m too curious to stop. I tilt my head and study her. “Because you’re hoping you two will get back together?”

She swallows, and then, realizing she’s been neglecting her coffee, she stalls by taking a sip. She only answers after she’s done. “Because no one has asked me out, to be honest.”

I nearly snort. “I find that hard to believe.”

Her green eyes flare with annoyance. “Well, it’s true. I don’t really put myself out there, and the breakup is relatively fresh, only a few months old.” She frowns hearing herself. Is a few months fresh? Not really. Understanding that, she adds, “I’ve been busy with work, busy preparing to come here.”

“Do you miss him?”

Her blush finally reaches her cheeks. “Why all the questions?”

I shake my head, only now realizing I’ve been giving her the third degree. I lean forward and reach for the booklet. “Just curious.”

“What about you?”

I flip open the front page and see an entire table of contents with page numbers and everything. Summer is nothing if not meticulous.

“Are you single?” she presses.

I smirk. “Single as they come.”

“Because you’re so isolated? I doubt there are Sedbergh dating apps.”

“You’d be surprised.”

She laughs. “Really?”

“I’m teasing. You’re right, it’s harder to date here.”

“But Alice?” she suggests gently. “It sort of seems like there’s something there between you two.”

“I really like Alice, as a friend.”

She nods, understanding. “That’s too bad. She’s really great.”

“She is,” I confirm, not the least bit sad about the prospect of not being with her.

It occurs to me that I would love nothing more than to continue this conversation, to ask Summer more about Andrew. I’m curious about their relationship and how stupid the man has to be to let a woman like Summer slip through his fingers. I’m aware now, wholly, that I’m attracted to Summer in a way that’s starting to feel impossible. Even now, during this conversation, I’ve skated my gaze over her mouth, taken notice when she’s licked a bit of coffee off her lips. I’ve studied her fingers, the delicate hold she has on her coffee cup, and I want to reach out and feel her hand, hold it up and flatten it against mine, measure the difference before we lace our fingers together.

I clear my throat and flip to the next page.

“Should we get started?”

CHAPTER 13

SUMMER

NATE and I have barely come up for air in five days. We're in an all-out war against writer's block and imposter syndrome.

Right now, neither of us is allowed to leave the cottage. That's the rule: from the hours of 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. we have to work. So far, we've succeeded only in getting on each other's nerves. Saturday, the morning after we ate dinner with his friends, we flipped through my notes and he critiqued my descriptions of his characters, even though I pulled them directly from the style sheets produced by InkWell and approved by him! Not to mention, I *know* what I'm talking about. I've cross-referenced from my own read-throughs of his books. I know his characters like the back of my hand.

The next day, we broke down the plots of *The Last Exodus* and *Echo of Hope*. In the first book, a catastrophic event devastates earth, leaving only a small group of astronauts with the knowledge and the technology needed to escape the dying planet and find help for its dwindling population. Through *The Last Exodus*, this group of adventurers prepares for a dangerous journey into the unknown, with the goal of seeking inhabitable planets across the cosmos.

Book one is about this crew leaving Earth, and book two is about surviving in space. *Echo of Hope* is the uncomfortable middle, the stillness that exists for these twelve individuals as they leave their families and friends in the midst of a global catastrophe. Desolate and hopeless, the band of explorers travels from one star system to another. *Echo of Hope* delves further into the inter-crew relationships established in book

one, dissecting what everyday life would look like on a spaceship of this kind. The crew faces trials and tribulations, losses and grief. In the book's gripping conclusion, when hope seems lowest, they finally detect a promising exoplanet that could be their new home. All is not lost.

That's where we've left off.

All the readers—myself included—are hungry for answers, and I'm staring at the only man who can give them to me while he goes about making the slowest cup of tea ever brewed. He's breaking some kind of record.

"You already had a cup of tea this morning. Do you really need another?"

"No, I don't really want it."

I rub my temples, exasperated. "Then *why* are you making it?"

"I need something to do. I'm going stir-crazy."

He riffles through the tin of tea bags, reading every label with careful attention to detail.

Dear god, I'm going to lose it.

But I can't. I am the conductor of this crazy train. I have to keep us on track. I look over at the clock. It's 12:54 p.m., not quite quitting time yet.

This is what I have been able to pin down from him so far. The promising exoplanet first found in book two is Kepler-452b, and book three will begin as the crew descends to the planet, filled with hope and trepidation about the idea that this new world could be Earth's long-sought salvation.

I put in a call to work yesterday when I went into town to pick up a few provisions with Nate. My supervisor, Joy, answered the phone with a reluctant sigh. I love Joy because she's approachable and easygoing. She's the kind of boss who reads books on being an effective leader and wants me to be able to talk to her about anything. In short, I love her.

"I'm sorry we're doing this to you," she told me.

“No, it’s fine.”

“You don’t have to stay.”

“I want to be here—”

“I just checked the weather. It’s like below freezing there. I’ll call Liz and let her know that you tried but—”

“Joy—”

“—you just can’t get through to him.”

“*JOY.*”

She hesitated, listening.

“We’re plotting.”

“Shut up.”

I laughed. “I’m serious. I’m not making any promises, but...we’re at least *talking* about book three.”

“Holy shit. I have to let Liz know.”

“Wait. Could you hold off on alerting anyone else? I’m worried this won’t last, and I don’t want to speak out of turn. For all I know, he’ll be back to stacking rocks in the shed when we get back to the cottage.”

“Stacking rocks in the shed? *What?*”

I shook my head. “Just...give me a few more days. I’ll update when I can, but this is good news. This is progress.”

“Summer!” She paused and regrouped, lowering her tone, reining in her enthusiasm. When she spoke again, she did so with her best managerial tone—no frills, just business. “Thank you for the update, and I look forward to hearing more from you soon.”

“I’ll try to call again by the end of the week.”

“I’m appreciative of the work you’re doing over there, but remember, you can throw in the towel at any time. I sent you into a losing battle. No one expects you to actually succeed, okay? Don’t kill yourself trying to make this happen.”

“I won’t, I promise.”

“Good, okay. Keep me posted.”

The tea kettle whistles with steam, and the shrill of it shreds my last bit of patience. I grit my teeth and drop my head in my hands, trying to get us back on track.

“So the crew will establish a base on Kepler-452b and begin...what?”

“They’ll have to terraform and adapt the planet for human habitation. Do you think Orange Sunrise or Lemon Ginger sounds better?” he asks, holding up the two tea bags.

“Neither!” I snap. Then I compose myself. “Orange Sunrise.”

He’s not the least bit bothered by my outburst. We’ve been losing it on each other for the better part of five days. Since beginning these morning meetings on Saturday, I’ve kept a mental tally going: Nate has stormed out of the cottage three times, I’ve cussed up a storm twice, we’ve eaten through all five of my chocolate bars, and I’ve only held up my hands, pretending to strangle him once. So I think we should call that a win!

He holds the Orange Sunrise tea bag up to the light looking for what...ORANGES?!

It’s 12:57 p.m. now and yup, that’s it. I don’t care that I’m technically clocking out three minutes early. I’ll be here, ready to go, three minutes early tomorrow morning.

I scoot my chair back and shoot to stand. “I’m calling it. I need to do laundry.”

He doesn’t protest. He just dips the tea bag in and out of the water, in and out, in and out.

We’re going to kill each other before these plotting sessions are through, I know it.

“Figure out what they’re going to do on that damn planet,” I say, walking away.

“Amelia and Julian are going to end up together.”

I stop dead in my tracks and whirl around. “*What did you just say?*” I sound deadly serious because I am. Deadly, that is.

Amelia Turner—excuse me, *Captain Amelia Turner* is the interstellar mission commander. For the entirety of book one and two, Nate has carefully crafted a fledgling romance between her and the spacecraft engineer, Dr. Marcus Nguyen. I love them together!

“How could she possibly end up with Julian?!” I spit out his name like it’s the most horrible thing I’ve tasted all week.

“It’s been there the whole time,” he replies mildly, continuing with that damn tea bag. “The writing was on the wall, I just didn’t see it before.”

The writing wasn’t on the wall. What is he talking about? Marcus is respectful and quiet, a voice of reason on the crew. Meanwhile, Julian is a hothead—egotistical and combative. He’s done nothing but rile Amelia up since their very first encounter when he mistook her for a lowly flight assistant rather than his captain. I thought there was more likelihood of Amelia *killing* Julian than ending up with him.

No...this can’t be.

And then all at once, I begin to see it as clear as day. Scenes jump out at me. In book one, Amelia had a scary-high fever that wouldn’t break for days and Julian refused to leave her side, claiming it was part of his job. The whole time he acted as if he was begrudgingly taking care of her, draping cool cloths across her forehead and spoon-feeding her...but was he? In book two, they’re paired together for an inventory check. I tore through that scene—barely coming up for air—because I assumed they were going to come to blows when they accidentally got stuck in the airlock chamber for four hours. Their banter was electric.

Beyond that, he’s always just needled her in the most aggravating ways. He’s always called her Blondie, which Amelia has always claimed to hate, and I’ve felt that hatred as a reader. She’s his captain! To call her that is disrespectful and rude. Amelia is so careful and buttoned-up with the rest of the

crew, the perfect leader, but with Julian, all that flies out the window. He is her weakness.

“He loves her. He always has,” Nate says, finally turning to look at me over his shoulder. “I understand that now in a way I didn’t before.”

My fingers feel tingly. I want to be enraged that Nate’s just given away a spoiler like that, but then I have to remember that’s what we’re doing here—writing the novel, inevitably spoiling it.

“I didn’t like him in the first two books,” I say faintly. I’m not talking to Nate so much as working through this revelation out loud.

“No one did. Not even Amelia.”

My gaze flits up to his, my heart pounding. “When does she realize it?”

“Not until it’s nearly too late.”

I drag my hands down my face, exasperated by this turn of events. This changes everything! The internet is going to break over this news. Fans have loved Amelia and Marcus together for years. There are thousands of fan art images and videos inspired by their love story.

“How does it first happen? How do they get together? Have you envisioned it or—”

“During a fight.”

Of course. Amelia and Julian *love* to fight.

“Does he kiss her then?”

I swear Nate is almost smiling as he nods. “Yes.”

God, I bet that’s a good kiss. Nate will write that kiss so that a million hands will curl into fists, a million hearts will race with anticipation and longing. I feel like I need to sit down. “I’m not sure he’s good for her in the long run.”

Never mind that we’re talking about fictional people. They feel real to me. It *is* real, at least here and now.

“He is,” Nate confirms. There’s no opening for an argument. He sees what I can’t. He knows the truth.

God, Amelia and Julian?! How...

I realize something and wince. Again, my gaze captures his. “Does Marcus get hurt?”

His mouth flattens into a frown. “There’s no way to avoid it.”

My eyes widen. Now I’m gesticulating with my hands, going to bat for Marcus. “You could weaken his feelings for her, make him less involved. Maybe have him be interested in someone else? Eleanor or Nadia? Nadia is another engineer—they would have that in common.”

He tilts his head, studying me for a moment. “Do you think Marcus wants Nadia?”

No. Not at all.

He shakes his head firmly, his mind already made up. “It cheapens it for the reader. Marcus loves Amelia. He will put up a fight.”

I throw up my hands and walk away. This is too much. I’m going to do laundry and process this revelation and try not to let it derail my entire day.

I want that scene. To hell with the rest of the plot, the rising climax and the pulse-pounding conclusion. I want Nate to get to work on that kiss. I want to know how he’s going to do it. Already, my loyalties are shifting. While I’m hand-washing my clothes in the upstairs bathtub, I reconsider Marcus and Amelia’s relationship. Marcus wasn’t perfect for her, not exactly, but I was willing to overlook that before. He has never been Amelia’s complement so much as her equal, too much like her in every way. She was comfortable with Marcus, and the reader wanted that for her because in a world where everything else was a jumbled mess, it was good for Amelia to have that steady partner by her side, someone she could really depend on day in and day out. But deep down, there was no challenge for her there, and Amelia, beyond anything else, *loves* to conquer a challenge.

I hang my clothes on a line in the upstairs hallway with a fan oscillating back and forth, drying them slowly. I should be embarrassed that I'm hanging my panties and bras up in plain sight, but I'm too preoccupied to care.

I hoped that by coming up here, I'd calm down and maybe come to terms with this abrupt change. In fact, it's the opposite. I'm only working myself up more, getting angry in ways I can't totally explain or put my finger on.

From the upstairs window, I see Nate outside, near the back of the property, repairing a small section of the stone perimeter wall. Those rocks he was sorting in the shed the other day are stacked beside him. He's hard at work, his movements diligent and methodical.

He's not the least bit bothered by our morning. He's totally fine!

Before I know it, I'm flying down the stairs. I don't bother with a coat. I don't even have shoes on!

I'm marching across the yard behind Nate's cottage, melted snow seeping into my wool socks, numbing my toes. I'm almost to him when I shout his name.

He turns, his expression hardening with annoyance once he sees how I'm dressed.

“Go back inside.”

I completely ignore this, coming right up to him until I'm panting with anger against his chest. “What's her reaction when he kisses her? Does she slap him?”

“Summer—”

“I have to know! You just dropped a bomb on me! I mean, this whole time, *for years*, I've been happy with Marcus and Amelia, but now suddenly, I want her to break his heart and go after Julian. Why?! I really liked Marcus.”

God, I'm angry. Inexplicably so.

He stares down at me, sweeping his gaze over my features. He's still calm when he replies, “Marcus is a likable guy. You were supposed to feel that way.”

“Julian is not for her!” I suddenly shout, angry for some reason. I’m a hair’s breadth away from stomping my foot like a child.

“He is.” His bold tone sends a shiver down my spine.

“Amelia is too sensible to fall for him! Too smart to let a man like Julian seduce her!”

Nate scowls. “Go back inside, Summer. Your socks are soaked.”

I release a guttural groan, born from the depths of my soul. “Don’t tell me what to do! God, I’m so mad at you!”

“Good. This is what I want readers to feel.”

“*This?*”

“All of it.”

“You drive me insane!” I erupt.

He steps forward and hauls me up off the ground, lifting me and carrying me back inside. Apparently since I wasn’t going to follow directions, he’s taking matters into his own hands.

“Put me down, you jerk. I can get frostbite on my toes if I want to! It’s my own damn body!”

“Stop being immature.”

“Stop pissing me off!”

“*God*, you’re insufferable!”

Then he drops me down on the kitchen floor, walks to the back door, and slams it shut behind him. A minute later, he’s back at the wall, laying rocks, repairing it with careful attention to detail. Inside, I rage.

CHAPTER 14

SUMMER

AFTER OUR FIGHT OUTSIDE, I spend the afternoon in my room, lounging on my daybed beside Cat, rereading *The Last Exodus* and *Echo of Hope*, looking for every scene Amelia shares with Julian. I feast on their interactions, hungry for more, rereading dialogue again and again, seeing things differently now that I know what's to come for them and their relationship.

Nate's absolutely right. It was there, hidden. It's funny the way characters can do that in a book, take on a new life, become entirely separate from the person who created them.

It doesn't mean I'm not still angry about the change. While I read about Amelia and Julian, I'm also reminded of everything Amelia and Marcus have been building. His love for her still exists. I read a particularly tough scene, a tender moment they share, just before I come down to make dinner. It was a mistake; I've worked myself up again.

When Nate pads down the stairs, I can't even turn to look at him. I know he's showered; I don't need to confirm it by glancing back at his damp, tousled hair. I can smell his soap, a familiar scent now, a favorite comfort.

He doesn't give me space in the kitchen the way I want him to. I'm clearly making dinner, but he puts away dishes, fiddles with a bottle of wine, accidentally brushes against me once, then twice, so that I can't help but let out a little sound of frustration.

He isn't the least bit bothered by it. If I were acting this way in New York, Andrew would scurry up the stairs and

leave me be. If anything, Nate only burrows in deeper.

“What are you making?” he asks.

To be honest, I don’t even know. I’ve just thrown some things together. “Pasta with chicken and buttered bread.”

“It smells delicious.”

I aim my wooden spoon at him. “Be glad you’re even getting some after what you did earlier.”

“Carrying you inside?”

At the sound of amusement in his voice, I glare at him, eyes narrowed and harsh. He’s smiling, and god, unfortunately, he’s so good-looking. Black t-shirt, jeans, bare feet, muscled forearms, dimpled cheeks—the details of a man who seems to control my every nerve.

I don’t even say anything. I can’t. I just turn around and keep cooking.

He doesn’t ask me if I want wine; he knows I do. He gives me a heavy pour then drops the glass on the counter beside the stove. Of course, he’s too close when he does it. His scent wraps around me like a hug. No, a *vise*.

I take the glass and drink the first sip, surveying him sneakily over the rim. He’s watching me too. It appears neither one of us is all that stealthy. “Saw you playing with rocks again today.”

His lips curve around the rim of his glass. “Why do you watch?”

“There’s no other form of entertainment around here.”

His brow arches like, *Isn’t there?*

“And what did you do this afternoon?”

“I worked,” I say defiantly. Ha!

“On what?”

I didn’t expect the follow-up question. I have to look away. “Just retracing plot points in the first two books.”

“You were reading Amelia and Julian’s scenes.”

I don't bother responding. I make a big show of stirring the boiling pasta like it's a huge imposition, and then I go over to him, right up to his chest, and when he doesn't move, I scowl and point to the drawer behind him. "You mind?"

His amusement only rankles me more as he slides over and lets me retrieve salad tongs, which I didn't need and have no use for, but I will not let him know that. I want to look busy so he'll drop the subject, but I should have known better. As soon as our meals are plated and we've taken our seats at the table, clinked glasses, and played civilized dinner partners for all of three minutes, he brings it up again.

"What scenes?"

I wrap my hand around my fork in a death grip and close my eyes. "So help me god, don't bring up the books. I don't want to talk about it. I don't even want to *think* about it."

He waits for me to compose myself before he replies. "Alright, then what are we going to talk about?"

"How about we sit in silence and pretend the other person doesn't exist?"

"Why does the change bother you so much?"

That's a question for my therapist. Too bad I don't have one. Maybe Cat can give me some advice. He came down to eat his dinner and putter around the kitchen. Now, he's by the fire, cuddled up and listening to us talk.

"Fine, no more book talk. Do you miss Andrew?"

Do I miss Andrew? I texted him yesterday when I was in town, just after I spoke with Joy. I didn't think he'd get back to me right away, but his name lit up my screen. He called, and I answered. "Hi."

"Hey." He sounded sick with relief. We hadn't talked in almost a week. I didn't think much of it, but maybe he's been trying to get ahold of me. I can imagine it's been stressful on his end.

"Everything okay?" I asked, worried maybe there was something happening with my family.

“No, things are fine. I’m just...missing you.”

His admission took me aback. We’ve gone through this pattern before, breaking up and getting back together, the ultimatums and the concessions.

I doubt anything has changed for him. He wants us to move forward, would love me to move in with him and talk about plans for the future. I’m just not there yet, but I love Andrew. I know I do. He’s such a good man.

“I miss you too,” I said, feeling it. “I wish you were here.”

And I meant it. It would be so nice to see him, to show him around Sedbergh.

“I wish I were there too. Work’s insane at the moment, but there’s some light at the end of the tunnel.”

I let him unload some of his woes, complaining about the new guy he’s had problems with for weeks. Our call didn’t last long.

“Do you miss Alice?” I ask Nate now.

Slowly, Nate smirks, and it has the same effect as a torch skimming across my skin, sending fire through my veins.

“Alice and I weren’t like that.”

“So you never slept together?”

“It was simple, and more importantly, it’s in the past. You and Andrew are ongoing, correct?”

“We’re... I guess, yes,” I stammer.

Nate frowns in concentration, but I can tell he’s still toying with me when he continues, “Or *wait*, you said you could see other people, but you haven’t.”

I tighten my hold around my fork again. “It’s not so easy.”

“Why?”

“Andrew is the only man I’ve ever been with, so to casually open it up to other people is not as simple as it sounds.”

“You’ve never been with another man?”

He says it with a low rumble in his voice, like he's restraining something.

“Don't look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

I want to squirm on my seat.

“Like you're hungry.”

He chuckles and looks down, studying his wine glass, but it doesn't last long. He's too intrigued by this conversation to let it go.

“You're not curious?”

“I never said that.”

His gaze flits back up to me. “Interesting.”

“Should I give Oliver a call?”

His jaw ticks, and I smile, feeling like I've won. What have I won exactly? I'm not sure. This game feels inappropriate and wrong on *so* many levels.

“So there's a chance you'll run right back to Andrew?” he asks, barely concealing his sneer.

I shrug one shoulder casually. “That's the most likely possibility, yes. We've been together for a long time. He knows my family. It just fits.”

“‘It just fits’...is that going to be in your vows?”

I scowl at him. “Why do you get to pick apart my relationship? Huh? Why don't we turn the tables?”

“Because your love life is so much more interesting than mine.”

“You've never been in love?”

He reaches for his wine glass and shrugs. “I never said that. But to be clear, this thing you have with Andrew isn't love.”

“You have no idea what you're talking about!” I say with an indignant laugh. “God, you're so arrogant.”

“If it were love, you wouldn’t be here right now. You wouldn’t have accepted an open-ended job in the middle of nowhere, with me.”

I roll my eyes, waving my hand. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

“Out of sight, out of mind,” he retorts.

I scoff. “What a romantic.”

His eyes narrow in challenge. “Day by day and night by night we were together. All else has long been forgotten by me.”

I can’t place the quote.

“Who is that?”

The side of his mouth rises. Those dimples sear. “Whitman.”

“Ah, so you *are* romantic. I bet that drives women wild. Handsome, rich, mysterious...”

“Who exactly are you referring to?”

“And *humble*, too!”

He laughs and shakes his head, drinking his wine. I swear there’s a faint blush on his cheeks. He really doesn’t see it then.

“Who was it before Alice?”

His eyes darken. “It doesn’t matter.”

“So there have been a lot?”

“More than you’ve had apparently. Is Andrew good in bed?”

“How would I know? I have nothing to compare him to.”

“Don’t you want to know?”

“What it’s like to have sex with another man?” I smile coyly. “*Are you offering?*”

One...two...three seconds pass, and my heart thunders in my chest.

“You’re playing with fire,” he warns.

“You *are* offering! Should we do it right here?” I quip. “I can sweep these plates off the table and let them crash to the floor...”

God, his eyes are molten. I’m pushing him too far, but I can’t rein it in. I’ve been stuck in this cottage for too many days. Besides, I’m enjoying this. It’s fun.

“Would you have sex with me? Just once?”

How does he keep his expression so neutral, his emotions so carefully tucked away? “As an experiment?”

“Yes.”

His eyebrows furrow. “You say it like it would be a favor.”

“Ah...so you’d enjoy it?”

“Of course I would.”

I melt at his rough tone.

“Don’t be so sure of that. Maybe I’m horrible. After all, I’ve only been with Andrew, remember?”

“*Summer.*”

My name comes out like a painful warning.

I didn’t want it before, not this clearly. I’ve been attracted to Nate since the moment I saw him—those blue eyes, that strong jaw, his hands, the prominent veins protruding up his forearms. Every part of him is a siren song. Beautiful and fierce and, above all, intriguing. He tugs at me, and all at once, right now, it comes into focus.

I want Nate.

If not forever, at least for what we’re discussing—one night.

“I feel like I should put myself in time-out.”

He won’t match my smile. He’s angry, or at least...I think he is. It’s so hard to read his emotions, especially at a time like this.

I scoot my chair back and start to clear the table. I pick up my plate then reach around to take his as well. Lightning quick, he reaches out to grab my arm. He stills me and rises from his chair, eclipsing me with his height and his dark mood.

“Don’t tempt me, Summer. You live right down the hall, tucked in that little bed. It would be so easy to have you.”

He’s turning this inside out, muddying it, and making me angry. What started out as lighthearted teasing now feels tainted.

I try to yank my arm out of his hold, but he doesn’t let up. He bends down, his forehead level with mine, his mouth hovering so close I can practically taste him. My body reacts as if we’re already kissing, fireworks trickling down my spine.

“Should I?” he asks. *Have you?*

My eyes are already closed. My reply is so clear.

He knows it, but he doesn’t give it to me. His lips never press down to mine. He never takes the path he promises he will.

He leaves me there, standing with my eyes closed, his handprint burned on my arm, and I don’t see him again the rest of the night.

CHAPTER 15

NATE

I'M LYING IN BED, thinking about Summer. I'm thinking about *Summer's lips*, full and perpetually curved like she's smiling at a hidden secret. *Summer's forever legs*, the kind that draw your eye and keep your attention. I rarely see them since it's the dead of winter, only when she wanders out in her nightshirt, the hem skimming the middle of her thighs, my wool socks bunched around her ankles. *Summer's smart mouth*. I took a shower last night, getting myself off while the hot water poured over me.

I felt guilty then and I feel it more so now, listening to her move around in her room, knowing I'm fantasizing about a girl I shouldn't touch.

I almost kissed her last night in the kitchen. Where would we be now? In my bed?

We shouldn't talk about relationships anymore. I shouldn't keep bringing up Andrew.

Andrew.

I fling my blankets off and push to stand, stretch, and then head for the door. We're supposed to start work soon, and if I'm late, Summer will have my head. She's fierce, yes, but she's also a pain in my ass.

I go into the bathroom, and she's there, brushing her teeth. Her strawberry blonde hair is piled up on her head. Her nightshirt is just as I pictured it a moment ago: too short.

"Get out."

She glares at me. “I’m almost done, you brute,” she says, the words barely discernible as she speaks around the side of her toothbrush.

“I need to pee.”

“Then *pee*.”

Fine by me.

I walk over to the toilet and am about to drop my pants when she squeals and darts out into the hall. “I was kidding!”

I kick the door closed with my foot and smile.

I’m done in a matter of seconds. I wash my hands then grab my toothbrush. She gets impatient.

“Are you almost done? I need to spit.”

The doorknob jangles and she pushes her way back inside.

I love this cottage. For years, it’s fit me perfectly. This sink has always done its job, but now with two people standing in front of it, hip to hip, it seems too small. I guess I could move. I *should* move, but then Summer’s leg wouldn’t brush mine. Our arms wouldn’t touch.

She leans over, runs the water, rinses her mouth. When she comes up, she smiles and shows off her teeth, as if she’s a kid proving she’s done. I expect her to leave, but she gets out a cosmetic bag filled with creams and mascaras and whatever else she seems to think she needs. I’m staring at her right now, fresh out of bed, and she’s stunning.

I finish brushing my teeth, and then I ask, “How long are you going to leave your bras and underwear hanging in the upstairs hallway?”

She rubs moisturizer onto her face and shrugs. “They weren’t dry when I went to bed last night.”

“Surely they’re dry now.”

Her eyes catch mine in the mirror. “Are your cheeks a little red?”

I prop my hands on my hips. The gesture is supposed to convey *No more nice guy*, but she doesn't look the least bit worried. "Get that lacy black bra out of my hallway."

"Or what?"

Or what?

I wet my lip, and I *see* her shiver. *Summer, Summer, Summer. You're not fooling anyone.*

"Fine. I'll clean them up. My, my, you're extra moody this morning. Didn't sleep well last night?"

I think of my shower...my long shower that only left me mildly satisfied. All those feelings from last night come rushing back in now. The tension between us didn't die overnight; it grew teeth.

"What happened to the shy Summer? The nice quiet girl who showed up here at my doorstep begging me to let her stay?"

Her eyes spark. "You know, it's funny. That's the way I usually am, shy and quiet. Ask anyone. I'm not this person. *You* bring it out of me. The very worst." She cocks her head and props her hands on her hips, matching my stance. "Proud?"

"Extremely." I head her way, needing to get back out into the hall. She doesn't move though, which means we're chest to chest again, always too close. I look down at her, and she lifts her chin up in a show of defiance. For a brief moment, I let my gaze trail down her delicate neck to her collarbone peeking out of her loose nightshirt. She's not wearing a bra, and I can see the effect I'm having on her, her body's innate response to me. What a dangerous game, being this close. "I'm going into town today."

"What about work?"

I can't do it this morning. If I stay in this house with her, that nightshirt will come off. I'll know the taste of her lips, and everything else. I'll make her forget Andrew ever fucking existed. All before we've had our coffee...

“We’ll reconvene tomorrow,” I say, sliding around her so I can put distance between us.

“You’re not giving up, are you?” she calls after me. “We’re finally getting somewhere!”

She’s right, we are. I don’t usually like to stall momentum once I have it, but getting out of here is all I can think about right now.

“Tomorrow,” I promise.

I change quickly and grab my coat off the hook downstairs. It’s freezing out. The temperature somehow dropped even more last night. The sky overhead is overcast and gray. Even if there’s no snow in the forecast for today, there’s enough piled up outside to keep me from continuing work on the fence later.

Truly, there’s not much I need in town, but it’s fine. I stop in and get breakfast and an espresso at the coffee shop. I had the forethought to bring a book with me, so at least I’m partially distracted from the problems that await me at home.

Once I’m done eating, I give Patrick a call because it’s expected. A weekly check-in is the least I can do, even if it’s only a few minutes. This week, for the first time in a long while, I have good news to report.

“I’m working,” I tell him once the call connects.

“On the book?”

I’m not surprised he wants clarity. I’m sure he half-expects me to be talking about my fence project.

“Yes. Summer and I have started plotting. It’s loose and it’s only been a few days, but the spark is there.”

I can feel his relief through the phone. That heavy sigh speaks volumes, as if he’s unburdening his soul.

“I haven’t put pen to paper yet,” I say, not wanting him to get too carried away with hope.

“That’s okay.”

It’s quiet for a moment.

“Is she helping?”

I’m glad he can’t see my responding smile through the phone. Helping? I’m not sure that’s the word for it.

“She’s a force to be reckoned with, I’ll just say that.”

“Interesting,” he muses. “I won’t say anything to InkWell yet.”

“Of course. There’s nothing to say anyway. It could all go up in flames.”

“Take it easy then, don’t let that happen.”

His words echo in my mind as I drive down to visit Martin. I end up spending half an hour chatting with him. I buy bags of groceries—anything that looks good—and nearly his entire stock of Cadbury chocolate bars. Summer and I need them for plotting. Wine too.

“How’s the girl? Summer?”

“She’s fine.”

“Beautiful, no?”

“She works with me,” I point out, like that’s answer enough to his question.

He chuckles. “Like Freya’s stepmom worked with me...” His brows rise as he shakes his head. “I know how that goes.”

If I think I’m going to find solace elsewhere, it’s not happening, but I can’t help trying one more place.

I stop into Main Street Books on my way back out of town. With how cold it is, my groceries will be fine in the car for a while. Alice is inside with her reading glasses perched on her nose as she flips through a stack of receipts behind the counter.

The door chimes as I enter, and she looks up with a big smile. “Nathaniel!”

“Hey, didn’t think you’d still be in today.”

She pushes her glasses up onto her hair. “I needed to do some bookkeeping. I’m behind, which is embarrassing because it’s not like I’m dealing with customers all day long.

Time just gets away from me. There's always something else to be doing—shipping orders, cataloguing inventory. Anyway, what brings you in? Need something good to read?"

I can't tell her I'm here because I'm avoiding going home, so I nod and tell her I'm looking for a good book. Alice is great at giving recommendations. Even if her grandmother hadn't pushed her into owning a book shop, she would have found her way to the profession eventually. It's what she's meant to be doing.

I have a stack of books on my bedside table that will be pissed at me when I add yet another to their pile, but Alice talks me into a murder mystery, and well, you can never have too many good books in your to-be-read pile, right?

"What are you doing for dinner? Want to round up the gang and come by the cottage?"

The invitation is out before I've even decided it's a good idea. I want a buffer between Summer and me. With the way things were going last night and this morning, I know what will happen if she and I are left alone for too much longer.

"I could," she says, mulling the idea over in her mind. "I'd planned to make a lasagna, but I could easily bake it at your place. Freya and Mike were going to come over for dinner."

"I'll let them know to stop by too. Oliver, whoever. Pass word around."

"Fun! It's been ages since we've had a proper dinner party. Freya was planning to bring a dessert to my place, so that's already covered. I'll have Oliver bring a few extra bottles of wine."

The plan is set in motion so easily I don't have time to backtrack and rethink my decision.

When I get home, I find the cottage cleaner than it's been in months. A candle I didn't even know I owned is burning on the kitchen table, and Summer is cuddled up with Cat near the fire, reading a book. Her chin is resting in her hand, and she looks so thoughtful and serene.

The sight stops me in my tracks. I didn't know how lonely I felt before, coming home to an empty cottage instead of this.

She looks up, notices the grocery bags in my hands, and then a playful smile stretches across her lips. "Please tell me you got more chocolate."

I walk in and drop the bags on the kitchen table. "You're a fiend. Martin said I had to cut you off."

Her jaw drops. "He did not! It was *you* who ate through that whole bar yesterday when we were plotting! I only had two bites!"

"Come help me unload this stuff."

"Please."

"Please, get over here."

She rolls her eyes and lays her book face down on the edge of the couch so she won't lose her place. With gentle care, she lifts Cat and sets him back down in her warm spot, wrapping the blanket over him like he's a newborn baby.

"You know he's feral," I say drolly.

As she saunters toward the kitchen, her gaze catches mine, and it's filled with mischief when she replies, "Yes, just like someone else I know."

If it were different, if she were already mine, I'd back her up against the kitchen wall and press my mouth to hers. I'd slip my hand up under her sweater and steal all her warmth. I'd tell her I missed her all morning, as ridiculous and silly as it sounds. I wasn't away from her for long, but her scent was missing, her laughter and sunshine.

I blink the thought away and hand her a bag to unload.

"Good god, did you leave any cheese for anyone else?"

I saw her eating this same brand yesterday, and she made some offhand comment about how much she liked it. I guess I wasn't paying attention when I swept more into my basket.

"We're having a dinner party," I say, glad for the excuse once I see all the other crap I purchased. Now, it seems like I

didn't buy it all for her.

Her eyebrows shoot up. "Tonight?"

"Yes."

"*You're* hosting a dinner party?"

"Don't look so shocked. I'm a great host."

She barks out a laugh before she slaps a hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry. Yes. You are. You've hosted me the last week and a half and we've only argued *most* of every day. An accomplishment, I'm sure. Who's coming?"

I go back to unloading grocery bags. "Everyone who was at dinner last Friday. Freya, Mike, Alice..."

When she doesn't reply, I look over to see her face is lit up. "I wasn't sure I'd see them again," she admits.

"Well you are. Tonight."

"Good thing I cleaned up. What are we serving?"

"Alice is bringing lasagna and Freya's bringing dessert."

She whips open the fridge and bends down to survey what we have. "Okay. Looks like I can pull together a salad and some appetizers." She's already yanking stuff out. Never mind that we still need to put groceries away. "My mom makes this amazing simple vinaigrette dressing." She chews on her bottom lip. "I wish I knew the exact recipe. I know there's honey and Dijon mustard, olive oil, and is it vinegar—or no, apple cider vinegar? What's the difference?"

She pauses with her arms filled with crap and looks at me like I'd possibly know which vinegar her mom uses in her dressing recipe. I can't remember the last time I ate a salad, much less constructed one.

Seeing the look on my face, she rolls her eyes. "Oh never mind, I'll figure it out."

While Summer's busy slicing cheese and fruit, I bring down a few spare chairs from upstairs so everyone will have a place to sit. My kitchen table can be expanded with a leaf, though the ancient thing isn't happy about it.

Summer watches on with a secret smile. She enjoys me having to struggle like this.

She has her own problems to worry about though. “How’s the salad coming?” I ask.

She’s over near the sink with a mad scientist’s setup, every condiment, oil, vinegar, and spice I own set out in front of her.

“Oh don’t you worry your pretty little head about the salad. It’ll be fantastic.” Then she samples a bit of the dressing she just finished making, pulls a face like she’s never tasted anything more disgusting in her entire life, and dumps the contents into the trash bin to start over.

It’s been a long time since I’ve hosted anyone in the cottage. A year, maybe more. It hasn’t been intentional. I didn’t wake up one day and decide to become a reclusive asshole.

When I originally moved to England, it was to get away from the pressure and the people, yes. I had hoped the change of scenery would shake something loose inside me, free me of the constraints I felt back in New York. I wasn’t completely wrong about the move here. I was hopeful for a while. When I originally met Alice and Mike and everyone, I was more outgoing than I am now, friendly even. Jesus, it’s hard to imagine.

Then months passed.

A year.

Two years.

Inspiration didn’t strike, work only became harder, and it now seems utterly impossible to keep up pretenses. My writer’s block has been corrosive, affecting my mood, chiseling away at my life. I’ve become more and more insular, depressed and quiet. I’ll still meet Alice and the group out every now and again, but at home, here, it’s just been me, alone with my anger for a long time now.

My isolation hit home a few months ago, during the holidays. I didn’t get back to the States for Christmas this year. My mom passed away from ovarian cancer a long time ago,

but my dad lives in Washington State near my brother and his family. In the past, I usually make it over there for a visit in spring and again around Thanksgiving or Christmas. This year, that didn't happen. I can still remember the sadness in my dad's voice when I told him I wouldn't be there. It's better though. I don't want to cast my dark cloud over my family, taint them with everything I'm dealing with. It's been a personal, difficult journey for a while now. No one truly understands it, not even Patrick, not completely.

Summer's the only reason anything has changed. She's too bright and loud and annoying and irresistible.

Another dressing gets made and tossed out.

"Oh my god, how is it getting worse?!" she asks herself.

I don't realize I'm smiling until it's too late. There's no escaping it—this feeling of summer.

And as that thought springs to mind, I do an about-face, mumble about needing a shower, and head up the stairs as fast as I can. I'm surprised I hit every stair.

Before, with Summer, there was attraction. Right from the beginning, I noticed that, but it was simple. I could categorize her in my head and file her beauty away as an afterthought.

But this? My chest tightening to the point of pain? Me locking the bathroom door behind me like I'm scared of what I might do if I *don't*? This is more than I anticipated, more than I've felt in years.

Oh god, I hate it. I feel like everything is suddenly tender and raw, like my heart is living outside my body. I lean over the sink and look in the mirror. A bear stares back at me. If not a bear, a scraggly man who could have used a decent shave three months ago. I'm surprised she hasn't run out of this cottage screaming.

I turn on the shower, and while I wait for the water to get hot, I pull my shaving cream and razor out of the cabinet.

CHAPTER 16

NATE

WELL THIS IS TURNING out horribly. The dinner party started an hour ago. Everyone showed up, just like I expected, except Oliver brought a friend, some kid—well, I guess he's Summer's age, but he seems younger than her. He's enamored, cornering her in the kitchen and commandeering most of her time while the rest of us hang out in the living room.

When I ask, Mike tells me he's a new hire on the farm, a relative of so-and-so, I don't know, I'm only half listening as I try to pick up what the guy is telling Summer to make her smile.

This is my cottage and those are my smiles!

Suddenly, I've decided I don't feel like sharing. I'm greedy and annoyed. I push up off my couch, walk over to her while they're talking, and wrap my hand around her arm, lightly enough that I won't hurt her as I tug her away.

"Come pick out another bottle of wine you want me to open. The others are almost empty."

"Nate." She laughs, looking back at Oliver's friend. "We were having a conversation."

"Who?"

"Me and..."

She doesn't even know his name, which tells me everything I need to know.

The guy sulks into the living room to join the others, and Summer scowls at me, lowering her voice when she says, “That was rude. He and I were talking. He was telling me about a variety of carrot that only grows... Why are you smiling like that?”

“Like what?”

She pushes my chest. “Like you’re making fun of me.”

I capture her hand and keep her palm flat against my shirt. One second passes, then another. Her expression changes, her eyes growing soft and contemplative. I look away and drop her hand, clear my throat, and point to the various wine options we have. There are a dozen bottles spread out. Everyone brought some to share, and I bought a bunch at the store earlier. We could survive here for weeks if we needed to. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve been snowed in. Last year, around this time, we got a really heavy snowstorm that made it impossible to drive on the streets. It was three days before most of it melted off.

I watch Summer look over the wines, studying her profile.

I suddenly wish we weren’t here in this cottage, at least not with such a crowd. Of course, it’s shit timing to realize this now. I’ve had Summer all alone for over a week. The whole reason I decided to host this dinner party is because I wanted to put a buffer between us, but now that so many people are here, I’ve found myself wanting to steal her away for a quiet moment all night. I haven’t talked to her one on one in hours, not since I went up to take a shower.

Now that I have her semi-alone, blocked off to the side of the kitchen, far enough in the corner that we’re mostly concealed from the view of the living room, I realize I don’t have a plan of action here. I’m still not sure how to proceed. After bantering like that during dinner last night, she has to be thinking about it too, no?

I step up behind her as she looks over the bottles, and it feels like we’re away from prying eyes if only for a moment.

“Do you like that one? Or should I open another red?”

She sets down the bottle she was inspecting, ignoring my question as she turns and props her hands behind her on the wooden counter. She tilts her head and studies me, waiting...

Summer's in a sweater dress. Maybe she's worn it before, but it looks different on her tonight. She's taken the time to straighten her hair, and it's so long and silky. She's put on makeup too, enough to make her green eyes bigger and brighter, if that's even possible.

"Are you the jealous type?" she asks.

"Not usually."

Never mind that I've left off the second half of that truth: Not usually...*except with you*. What good would it do to tell her my half-formed feelings? I'm already in trouble.

She only holds my gaze for a second more before she looks back down at the wine.

"I'm suddenly feeling like I've had a little too much," she admits. "Maybe we shouldn't open another bottle."

She's only had one glass.

"Other people might want more, and I doubt they'll be leaving anytime soon."

She scrunches her features like she doesn't like the sound of that and mumbles something under her breath.

"What was that?"

She startles and looks at me, innocence personified in her wide-eyed expression. "Oh." She swallows. "I just..." Her shoulders sag as she reluctantly offers the truth. "I said, 'I kind of wish they would.'"

I'm surprised to hear that. She seemed to be having a good time talking with Freya and Alice. She finally got the ratios right on her salad dressing too. I would have thought she'd be excited for everyone to try it.

"Why's that?"

She peers up at me, pink-cheeked and shy. For a long moment she stalls, chewing on the edge of her bottom lip.

“Why?” I prod, unable to stop myself from pushing us into this dangerous territory. Regrets can be worried over tomorrow.

She’s nervously toying with the bottom of her sweater dress now. “*Because* I’ve been thinking about what you and I talked about last night...about me seeing other people. Once, that is. Just to know what it’s like.”

Fuck. Me.

“Summer.”

“The offer’s still on the table, isn’t it?” Her attention drifts over toward Oliver’s friend. “I’m sure he—”

Before I know it, I have ahold of her cheek so I can guide her attention back to me. I inch closer. Our knees brush, my thigh slips ever so gently between her legs. My hand shifts from her face, moving around to the back of her neck. “Have I told you yet? I really like this dress.”

“You do?” She swallows and touches my forearm, and when I don’t shake her off, she keeps her hand on me, roving higher up over my bicep before stopping at my shoulder. A slow smile pulls at her lips.

“You shaved.”

Yes. For the first time in months. I felt like an idiot doing it earlier, carefully leaning over the bathroom counter, getting rid of the scruff, trying to look decent *for her*.

“I like it,” she admits boldly.

It’s the closest she’s come to admitting what she thinks of me, and now that I’ve had a taste of the truth, I want more.

“Tell me more. In the morning, we’ll forget everything.”

“You promise?” she asks sweetly.

I nod and lean in so she won’t have to speak loudly. A whisper is barely an admission. Words said only between us—maybe it’ll be like they were never said at all.

“In the morning, we go back to normal,” she demands, her hand moving from my shoulder to my chest, tracing a line

down the center of my shirt.

I swallow and nod. “We have to.”

Do we? Right now I can’t think straight.

She comes forward so her mouth is just below my ear. “Sometimes I can barely think straight...with you there’s always *something* tugging at me.”

Her confession sends fire through me.

“*More,*” I demand.

Her green eyes meet mine. She looks like pure innocence, but I know she’s not. Has Andrew ever seen this side of her? Does he even know it’s there?

“Last night—” She swallows and pauses, nervous to continue. “I couldn’t stop thinking about what almost happened. I *wanted* something to happen.”

I study her face, looking for more truths.

“Did you go to sleep right away?”

She shakes her head, only a little, shyly admitting the truth.

“What did you do?”

Her cheeks flush. I know she won’t say it. Not while voices trickle over from the other room. We’re not by ourselves, not really.

“Did it feel good?”

Her eyes flare. Her focus is on my mouth. Does she realize how intensely she’s staring at me? How transparent her thoughts are?

“Yes. So good I did it again this morning, after you left...”

My hand touches her hip, bunching the material of her dress enough that it rides up her smooth thighs. There’s no protest from her, not even a hint of warning. She’d let me pull it up more, with everyone in the other room.

Summer is not the sweet girl I thought she was. She’s *better*.

Fuck.

Like I've been scalded by a hot stove, I drop her dress and step away. What was I planning to do? Did I completely forget there are other people here? We might be partially concealed from view, but it wouldn't have been hard for one of them to lean over and see what we were doing. No one is fooled.

The timer dings for Alice's lasagna, and she rushes in to take it out of the oven. I'm still standing close enough to Summer that she gives us a curious look as she slips on her oven mitts.

"Everything okay?"

"Yup!" Summer replies, voice perfectly chipper as she scoots around me. "It smells *so* good, Alice! Let me just add the dressing to the salad and everything will be good to go for dinner."

Right. We haven't even eaten. I'm going to have to behave for another hour or two, at least. I know it's my own fault for inviting people here in the first place, but now suddenly, I want to kick everyone out. At least they're all used to my moods. No one asks me why I'm quiet when we take our seats. Summer slips into the chair beside mine, which is surprising considering I would have expected her to scurry to safety the first chance she got.

Even with the leaf, the table is small, and everyone's crowded in. Mike's on my right and the guy takes up room enough for four, so I'm tucked right up against Summer, our legs pressed together. Her dress rides up her thighs now that she's sitting, and when she notices *me* notice, she spreads out her napkin and surreptitiously jabs me with her elbow.

I conceal my smile by taking a bite of food.

Having Summer so close is the only reason I make it through the meal. I notice her every move. The little sound she makes when she takes her first bite of lasagna. Her hands as she reaches down to fix her napkin. I tug on it, trying to help straighten it, and her hand playfully bats mine under the table. It's silly, the way it starts, like we're playing a game of tug-of-

war, but then my fingers brush her bare thigh and the sensation is electric for both of us. I look down and see the goose bumps cascade down her legs. So I do it again, so lightly, and it goes unnoticed by everyone else as they listen to Alice go on about a story of a customer from Bulgaria that called the shop today. Everyone laughs at her Google translate mishap while my hand skims the hem of Summer's dress.

I have no idea what I'm doing, no control at all. Somewhere, buried beneath white-hot desire, there are warning bells and sirens and admonishing words, but I barely hear them, can barely even acknowledge anything beyond the smooth feel of Summer's skin as my hand slides up her inner thigh.

She doesn't pull away from me, doesn't make a peep. The only discernible difference is that her breath has picked up slightly, then it hitches faintly when my hand slips under her dress altogether. I'm so close to parting her legs...

I've lost my tether to sanity. There's no other excuse for how I could be doing something so bold at a dinner table with friends.

"Nate," she says, her voice an octave too high as she suddenly scoots her chair back. "Come help me pick another record to put on."

I follow her into the living room while everyone carries on. I don't even care if they're suspicious of us.

Summer's over near the record player in the far corner, her arms crossed, green eyes smoldering.

"Are you insane?" she hisses when I step close. When I don't answer, she looks over my shoulder to see if anyone's looking on. Then she leans in. "I've never done anything like that before."

"Neither have I."

My response throws her off, like she was hoping it'd be easier to blame me for the current state of things with us. But if I'm as helpless as she is...as out of control as she suspects...

“Sorry,” I say before stepping around her to flip through my records. I don’t have a vast collection here. When I moved from the States, I gave most of my albums to my brother for safe keeping. While I’m there, crouched down, Summer goes back into the kitchen, and after I put on *Let it Bleed* by the Stones and make my way back to the table, she doesn’t even look at me.

She’s shut down. I pushed things too far, and my apology likely didn’t cut it. Through the remainder of dinner, I try to come up with some way to explain myself without making this too difficult for us. We still have to work together. Letting this spiral out of control is the last thing I want.

Later in the evening, once everyone is full and tired and ready to set off, Summer closes the door behind Alice then turns back to look at me, her hand still on the knob. Her face is a mask of vulnerability, her eyes wide and doe-like. Her lips are parted like she’s having a hard time getting a steadying breath. She looks completely shattered. I did that to her, and I’m about to apologize—*god, she deserves an apology*—but she must realize what I’m intending to do because she shakes her head.

Oh. I’ve read it wrong.

It’s not an apology she wants.

The longer I look at her, the more her gaze alights with desire. Her chest rises and falls, and slowly, I walk toward her, my feet carrying me before I’ve acknowledged what I’m doing. It’s like the building of a crescendo, a wave cresting as I reach her and drop my hands on the door on either side of her head.

No, this isn’t a good idea. We can’t get carried away in this. If I were thinking beyond this moment, I wouldn’t be touching her. I know that, but I can’t pull myself away. Not if she wants this.

Just tonight. Just tonight. The mantra is a drug addling my brain so that I can’t come up with a good reason to keep my distance from her.

Now is the moment where she should turn away, shake her head, tell me no, but she holds steady. Her eyes lock with mine. She begs me with a silent pleading look, and I can't hold back anymore.

I bend slowly until my mouth is within reach of hers. Our lips barely graze, and already she's under my skin. I hold off just a moment longer, giving her the out if she needs it. But then she subtly leans into me, turning up the flame. Her lips are so soft and sweet. I move my hand to cradle her cheek then press my lips against hers, because to wait for one more second would be impossible. I kiss her because I'm desperate to know what summer tastes like.

She gasps and her hands rise up and flatten against my chest. I worry she means to push me away at first, but then the tips of her fingers dig into my shirt and she kisses me back like she's been craving this, almost as weak with need as I am. I keep her there against the door until our temperatures run hot, until I've kissed her so much her lips are swollen and red. Then we walk backward as she pushes me toward the living room. We're vacuum sealed in the moment, like whatever is happening now only exists right now. We don't stop to talk about it, there is no signing on the dotted line. I'm kissing Summer like this is the only chance I'll ever get. This mouth is only mine for so long, and I'll be damned if I let this night go to waste. I tilt my head and deepen our kiss as we near the fire.

I part her lips, and her moan feeds me. She shivers when my hands slip down to the hem of her dress. The hem I played with at the dinner table. The hem I've wanted to lift all night. I'm impatient now. Wanting her has made me desperate. I want the soft material gone, and she's all too eager to help me undress her.

She's an impatient little thing, yanking the sweater dress so the fabric stretches out, and then once it's off, she tosses it aside and I go absolutely still as I take her in. I want to look at her. I could look at her until the sun comes up, but she doesn't let me get my fill. She's on me, crushing her chest to mine as our mouths meet again. She's so hot, her skin like nothing I've ever touched, feather-soft and searing. I drag my hands down

her back, my fingers skimming the valley of her spine as she whimpers, showing me that her fragility is still there, her sweetness. She's driving me insane. I want to keep going and I do, brushing my hands over the pale pink silk panties. I get ahold of her hips, lifting until her legs come around my waist.

A moan erupts out of me once I have her seated there. She rubs my hard length through my jeans, and rather than shy away from it, she does it again intentionally. She feels what she's doing to me, and she only worsens it by rolling her hips, kissing down my neck, then finding her way back to my mouth.

"Tonight," she whispers.

It's a contract clause. I understand what she wants, and I nod because it's all I can do. If she wants this for tonight only, I'll feast as much as I can. I'll lay her down in front of this fire and stretch hours into days, minutes into infinities.

"Tonight" is my promised oath.

And then my hand wraps around the back of her neck so I can gather her close and we're kissing again because it feels like it's still brand new. Her lips are so plush. When I pull away to look at her, I can barely stand how beautiful she is. Glassy eyes, flushed cheeks, curved smile.

She leans in, wanting another kiss, but I hold her steady, angry with her that she won't let me have a second to take her in. Doesn't she realize I have to memorize everything now? Commit her to memory before she reaches for that dress on the ground and hides herself away again?

I set her down gently on the floor, not because I want to, but because I need both hands to explore her body. I slip her bra straps off her shoulders. Her bra is lacy and flimsy. It's so easy for me to tug the cups down slowly. I bare her to me millimeter by millimeter until her breasts spill out. I don't blink, don't move. Her hands fist, and I'm so glad she doesn't cover herself.

I don't even have the words. When I look up at her face, I swallow and kiss her again, trailing my mouth down her neck,

and then lower, so I can take the tip of each of her breasts into my mouth one at a time, holding them in my hand, feeling their weight. God, I've never touched better than this, never tasted anything so divine.

With skin as fair as hers, it's like I can see the blood rushing through her veins, coming to the surface, making her pink. I want to draw this out, tease her, and so I do. I know she wants me to skim my hand down into her panties, but I only stroke the silk between the center of her thighs back and forth twice, then pull back, returning my attention to her chest.

Her hands fist in my hair and she *tugs*. She's not gentle about it. But then, I'm not being gentle with her either. My teeth have left marks on her breasts. My hands have likely already bruised her. I can't seem to restrain myself. It's been too long and she's too much.

As if she's had enough, she pushes me and steps back, putting a few feet between us. She thinks it's a punishment, but seeing her from that vantage point, from the top of her strawberry blonde hair to the tips of her toes is so sexy I can barely catch my breath.

Her panties are askew, revealing more than they're concealing at this point. No matter—they'll be gone in a moment anyway.

CHAPTER 17

SUMMER

I'M NEARLY NAKED, standing close to the roaring fire. Nate's a few feet away, looking at me with a complicated expression—his blue eyes hold it all, the passion and the fury, the barely restrained need.

Other than the fire, the lights are low, and I imagine what my skin looks like with the flames dancing across my chest and stomach, my legs, my face. He can see everything. I feel like I'm baring my soul to him, standing here with my arms by my sides, no mask, no lighthearted banter, nothing to hide beneath.

My chest rises and falls as my heart races.

Words stall in my throat.

Everything up to this point has been easy. It's like every decision tumbled right into the next one. Kissing Nate, putting my hands on him, letting him undress me...that was so simple. This is the difficult part now, recognizing what could happen and *allowing* it.

Part of me wants to run upstairs, shut myself in my room, and lock the door behind me. Part of me wants to grab my dress and cover myself and...

Part of me wants to know what it would be like to sleep with a man like Nate. Something tells me this is my only opportunity, not just tonight, but forever.

Andrew is probably my future. I'll go back to New York and slip right back into my old life. I'll make my parents and

Emma happy because that's what I've always done. Changing careers might have been the only act of rebellion I had in me.

So this is my chance.

Tonight, with this man.

Nate is exquisitely handsome with his jaw clean-shaven, his hair styled as if he really took the time to make himself presentable tonight. It's so laughable. If he only knew how sexy he is merely rolling out of bed. Looking at him makes my stomach squeeze with longing. I'm shaking from it.

Our eyes meet, and I swear the air almost crackles. I've never seen into someone the way I see into him now. It's like he's holding a hand out for me and tugging me beneath the surface. Emotion clogs my throat.

I watch him swallow, the muscles working in his neck. Every part of him seems tensed, like he's holding himself back from pouncing. Is this hard for him? To look but not touch?

He's waiting for me to say something and I can't muster anything eloquent, but I can tell him what I want, the beginning, at least.

"Your shirt," I say, pointing at it.

The request surprises him, like he'd forgotten he was even dressed. But then his hands reach up to the top button, and he holds my gaze as he works on each one, undoing them until it's easy for him to pull his shirt off his shoulders and drop it back onto the couch.

He's so beautiful it's almost hard to look at him. He's also incredibly intimidating. Strong. Veins work up his forearms, biceps, and thick shoulders. He somehow seems bigger without clothes on. Nothing diminishing him, I suppose. There're freckles clustered on the tops of his shoulders where the sun catches him in the summer. There's a little jagged scar on the left side of his chest.

I want to walk over to him and trace every last detail. I want to fit myself into every groove, press myself against him until it's hard to catch a full breath.

I didn't anticipate this. This feeling is too overwhelming, and I have to blink and look away, stare at the fire for a moment before I gather the courage to glance at him again. He's so patient, standing there, letting me look at him. Then I realize, I'm doing the same for him. He's just as affected by me. We're in this together.

I've never thought much about what a one-night stand should feel like, but I doubt it's this. I imagine in most cases it's a frenzied make-out followed by awkward sex and a quick goodbye—the feeling of sharing yourself with a perfect stranger.

Nate is *so* familiar to me. I could make a home in his blue eyes. They watch me with such sincerity and conviction. God, I can tell he's a man who loves hard.

This is no joke to him, no simple night. He understands the gravity of what we're about to do and he's making space for me to accept it or flee.

Flee.

The idea is ludicrous now. Tonight, I'd crawl on broken glass to get to him. I'd beg and plead. I squeeze my eyes closed against the onslaught of feelings, and when I open them again, I don't meet his gaze. I step forward slowly, and he stays right where he is. I reach him and circle my arms around his neck, pressing myself up onto my tiptoes. His arms answer by wrapping around my waist, tightly holding me to him. My face rests against his chest, and I breathe him in deeply.

His fingers weave through my hair. His mouth falls against my temple, my cheek. His nose nudges my face until I turn enough to let him capture my mouth. The kiss is slow and languid. I feel it spread through my body like a drug, tingles fanning out in every direction. It's in my bones.

Holy shit.

His arms tighten around me and his tongue sweeps into my mouth and I'm so hungry for him. Impatience grows with every second his body presses against mine. I moan into his

mouth, trying to plead with him to push this on, to drag me down to the ground now.

But he doesn't. Instead, while we kiss, he repositions us seamlessly so that my back flattens against his chest, my face arches up toward his.

Usually, Nate doesn't throw his height around. He's not one of those guys who puffs their chest out and spreads their legs, claiming space like it's their right to have it. But now, his size overwhelms me. He looms behind me, strong and unyielding. I press my weight back against him and he doesn't budge, doesn't even falter.

He palms my breasts, kneading them possessively before he lets one hand skim lower. His fingers ignite my skin, down the center of my chest, my stomach, my navel, then he reaches the point of no return—just above my panties—that makes everything inside me suddenly squeeze with anticipation. I grip his wrist, not to pull him away but to push his hand lower, to force it past the top of the silk, down between my legs. I'll die if he doesn't touch me, and then he is and *god*—

He strokes that part of me that sings, slowly, leisurely taking a wrecking ball to my world. His fingers rub expert circles. He moves lower and I hold my breath, releasing a slow, soul-crushing exhale as he slides two fingers inside of me. The stretch. The heat. I feel like I can't take it, rising onto my toes just as the heel of his hand brushes across my sensitive skin. My nails bite into his wrist. Our kiss breaks and from over my shoulder, he looks down at where his hand disappears into my panties.

He pulls his fingers out then sinks them into me again. I writhe in his arms, and though I want this to continue forever, oblivion comes so fast. He knows what he's doing to me. My breath hitches, my hand squeezes his wrist tighter, my hips tilt forward and meet his hand, desperately needing more. He whispers praising words against the shell of my ear as his hand stays between my legs. It builds and builds...I feel like everything condenses down to a pinprick and then—

My lips part and I gasp.

Light erupts behind my closed eyelids. *Stars.*

His name slips past my lips on a shudder and he doesn't stop touching me, he never slows his pace.

The comedown brings a fresh wave of longing, like the endorphins have rushed through me and lit me up from the inside. I turn on him, wanting to wind him up just the same. He's done so much to me, felt every part, and he's still in his jeans! I can't even feel him the way I want to, and I'm so desperate I claw at him. I undo the button on his jeans, yank down the zipper. His pants aren't even off yet before my hand slips down into his briefs, sliding over him and oh god—the *size* of him, the silky heat overwhelms me. A shiver of fear about what I've done—how I've landed myself in hot water—is replaced swiftly by longing. I stroke him and he hisses between clenched teeth. My hand is so small on him.

I study his face, searching for every clue. He's not like me. He gives nothing away for free. I press up against him, chest to chest, and I keep my hand down in his briefs, working him up like he did to me.

I'm still choked with emotion. If our eyes met, I worry what he'd see. I hadn't realized the extent of these feelings, but I know no matter what, I'll have to tuck them away at the end of the night, shrink them down in the hopes they will disappear altogether.

I stroke him until his hands grip my biceps and he stills me, warning me to pause and let up. He'd come from my hand; I know it because he just did the same to me, and if he weren't keeping me from continuing, I'd press the issue, see if I really could do it.

"I'm not done," I say, insistent.

He's walking us backward, picking me up so that my feet mostly float over the ground. His arms are so sculpted and strong. When he has me in front of the fire, warm and toasty, he lays me down.

It's his turn, or really *my* turn to touch him. I want my chance, but he's up and over me, controlling what happens

next. I'm splayed out on a blanket, my hair fanned out around me while his eyes rake over me, unhurried. His hooded gaze lands on my breasts, and I can see the lust in his gaze. Like it's impossible for him to resist, his hand reaches out and he strokes the tips with the back of his pointer finger. His touch is so soft I want to cry out in anguish. Everything is too slow and exquisite—there's nowhere to hide in this.

Then his hands travel lower and he takes the material of my panties and slides them down. On one hand, I'm bare to him already; what's one more thing? On the other hand, though, this is it—the end. He sees me, all of me, and when his hands grip my thighs and press outward, parting me, I have to throw an arm over my eyes. It's embarrassment, but it's also the intensity of the moment. I can't be here and feel him and watch it all happening. I'm overloaded and aching and...

He lowers his mouth to kiss the inside of my knee and *I know*, I know what he's about to do. I almost push him off. I don't like this. I never liked it with Andrew and I felt ashamed about that. I don't want Nate to take it personally when I...

But then his head dips between my legs and his tongue runs over me like he's licking the top of an ice cream cone, and I gasp as if I'm taking my dying breath. He does it again, torturing me.

Andrew was always so rushed, always speeding things up and making me anxious, as if I wasn't responding as quickly or as much as I should have. His impatience bled into me and it only made it harder to relax and enjoy the moment. Nate is so drawn-out about it, and it flips the script. It makes me feel like it's *his* pleasure to do this to me, like he's enjoying it so much I'm giving him a gift. My heart softens. My arm slips off my face. I blink my eyes open and look down at him. Firelight dances across his body. The effect is almost sinister. His hands hold my thighs, keeping me pinned down and in place, splayed open for him just the way he likes.

“*Nate.*”

I plead with him, twining my fingers through his hair as he relentlessly continues to lick and taste me. For minutes now,

I've been hanging on by a thread that's about to snap, and then his fingers join his mouth and my back arches up off the ground, my hips thrust against him, and suddenly, it's there again, *the stars*.

I'm weak after. Dead, maybe. Opening my eyes would take a burst of energy I no longer have.

I feel Nate scoop me up off the ground, and I know I murmur things that make him chuckle.

More.

No, c'mon.

What about you?

Our night can't end.

I can open my eyes. I can...

I almost reach down to touch him, to keep going, but then he holds me tighter, cradled in his arms. I nuzzle my cheek against his hard chest and keep my eyes closed, happy to let him carry me up the stairs and to my bed.

It's only when I wake up later, alone, that I realize our one night is over.

CHAPTER 18

SUMMER

I'VE NEVER WOKEN up with regret like this. I can't even look at Cat. I roll over and face the wall, peel the blanket up so I can peer down in shame at my fully naked body. *Oh my god.* I tuck the blankets around myself again and squeeze my eyes closed like that will help me disappear altogether. For the first time since arriving in England, a part of me wants to go back to New York and reclaim my simple life.

It's clear I didn't think things through concerning this arrangement with Nate. Everything happened so fast over the last few days. What felt like harmless flirting quickly morphed into something more, and then before we could sit down and discuss things, we just went for it. His head was... His hands were... His tongue...

OH MY GOD.

I wasn't even drunk. The memories of last night are crystal clear, and if I wanted to recall them, I could. Oh and look at that, even if I *don't* want to recall them, they come anyway.

I groan and shove my face into my pillow, wishing I'd had more sense yesterday. Past Me really messed up. In what world was it a good idea to hook up with Nate? We still have to work together! We've barely begun outlining!

It's early, the sun lazing around behind the horizon line. I could get up and get out before Nate even wakes up. I could have hours to assess my feelings and figure out a plan of attack instead of only a few minutes. I need a shower, but I

don't want to run the risk of waking him up, so I edge toward my door and pry it open.

The resounding SCREECH could wake the dead. This old cottage with its charm and insanelly rusty hinges. Ugh!

I look over toward Nate's closed door, listening for any sound of him. When I don't hear anything, I move like a little mouse, scurrying on tiptoes toward the bathroom. As quickly as I can, I wash my face, throw a beanie on over my wild hair, and call it a win. I have my jeans and coat on, my boots laced up, and I'm at the back door before Nate wakes up.

When I open the door, a blast of cold air chills me to the bone.

It's colder than it has been the last few days, colder than I was anticipating. I tug my beanie down and stuff my hands into the pockets of my puffer jacket. My feet crunch in the new snow that fell overnight, just a few inches, fresh and white. My footprints are the first thing to mar the smooth surface, and I almost feel bad about it as I yank open the door of the shed. Nate's faded red bicycle is waiting for me just where I hoped to find it. I feel nothing but sweet relief as I tug it out and walk it through the snow toward the cottage's front gate.

My plan is to go into town and loop around on the bicycle until something piques my interest—the coffee shop, Martin's store, a bleak-looking graveyard...I have no preference. I just want to get away from here. *This* is my real downfall. My desire to flee clouds my judgment. Otherwise, I would have noticed how treacherous the conditions were on the road. Sure, a car or two has passed by me just fine, but the road itself is still mostly covered with snow and ice. I get barely five minutes down the road, wobbling this way and that way, like I took a bicycle out onto an ice-skating rink. Over and over again, the wheels lose traction then regain it, only to immediately lose it again. I look drunk.

But I'm persistent. The road is bad now, but surely, it'll get better up ahead.

Up ahead...

Up ahead...

Up ahead.

The echoes of my stupidity hit home as a car comes barreling down the road behind me, taking a curve too fast. I yelp and swerve quickly out of its way. The bicycle wheels lose traction once again and I go down hard and fast. The car zooms past me just as I land, half on the road, half in the snowbank. Fortunately for me, I catch myself with my hand before my head can hit the ground. I wince as the impact ricochets up my wrist into my elbow. My legs are tangled with the bike, and I drop it slowly, assessing the damage. My jeans are torn at the knee, and one of the pedals scraped my ankle. My arm is a little sore, but I roll my elbow out and I can straighten it just fine. It'll ache for a day or two, but I got extremely lucky. I could have completely wiped out. I could have been hit by that car!

Belatedly, I realize the asphalt tore into my hand enough that there's blood, but I can't look at it. I'll assess the damage back at the cottage.

And so begins my slow walk home.

I'm too scared to get on the bike again. I can't properly grip the handlebar with my left hand, and my wrist and elbow hurt. I'm sopping wet and shivering, fuming and annoyed by the time I wheel that stupid bicycle back to its home in the shed. I haven't even really inspected it. With the way my morning is going, I probably broke the damn thing and will have to pay to get it fixed.

I whip open the back door to find Nate in the kitchen. I stand there dripping wet in the doorway as he turns to me with a cup of coffee in hand, the steam rising up in curling ribbons. He looks rested and restored. He's just had a shower and he's wearing dark jeans and a hunter green sweater. His strong jawline is clean-shaven again.

This man.

THIS MAN.

Suddenly, I hate him.

As he assesses me, he frowns. “What did you do?”

“Nothing.”

I stomp over to the sink, not caring that I’m leaving muddy footprints on the kitchen floor. I’ll clean them later. After trekking down the road a mile with the bike, I’m sweaty and hot. I yank off my beanie and unzip my jacket. Everything gets flung onto the floor. I’m really making a mess here.

Then I turn on the water and, without looking, shove my hand underneath it.

“Ah!”

Nate is beside me suddenly, taking my hand out of the water so he can look at it. Better him than me. I choose to stare at a point on the wall in front of me instead, holding on to my annoyance to keep all the other emotions at bay. I can barely feel Nate’s grasp on my hand, the way he cradles it in his palm like it’s a baby bird.

“I took the bike out,” I offer.

“That was stupid,” he says with an admonishing tone.

Anger tears through me and I try to yank my hand away, but he doesn’t let me.

“I wanted to go into town.”

“Why?”

“I...I needed—” To escape you. “Tampons,” I lie.

I expect him to balk at the word like most men do. *OH MY GOD*, they say, *BLEGH!*

Nate doesn’t even care. Worse, I don’t think he believes me. I can’t confirm because I still refuse to look at him.

“I could have driven you into town.”

I sniff. “I figured you were still sleeping.”

He tilts my hand so he can see it in the light. “It’s not bad. Let me get a bowl and you can soak it for a minute. I won’t be able to tell how deep a few of these cuts are until we get your hand cleaned off.” He steps back a little, and out of the corner

of my eye, I see him inspecting the rest of my body, my torn and muddy jeans. “Are you hurt anywhere else?”

I shake my head. The scrape on my ankle is nothing. I’ll worry about it later.

He tells me to sit, and when I argue that I’m dirty, he levels me with a glare.

Right.

Once I take a seat at the table, he brings over a bowl of warm soapy water, takes my hand, and stands beside me—too close—as he gently cleans off the dirt and debris. He smells so good from his shower. I probably smell like I feel: roadkill.

He lets the water do most of the heavy lifting, and after a few minutes, my hand looks much better. Without all the dirt, it’s clear there aren’t any deep cuts, nothing even requiring a bandage.

“I’d wash it off again in the shower,” he tells me, carrying the bowl to the sink to dump it out.

“Thanks.”

Then before the conversation can shift, I screech my chair back and head straight for the stairs.

In the bathroom, I take a long, restorative shower. The steam rises up, filling the room, and I linger there, letting the water beat down on me. It feels too good to get out, but the hot water doesn’t last forever. Eventually, I’m forced to yank the shower curtain aside and step out onto the rug. I wrap a towel around my middle and listen carefully. I always want to know where Nate is, but right now it’s imperative; I didn’t bring clothes in here with me.

Just as I’m about to step out into the hallway, Nate opens the door.

I startle and wrap the towel tighter around myself. “I’m almost done,” I say with a squeaky high voice.

He looks away, averting his eyes. “Sorry. I was coming up to get your jeans so I could try to mend them.”

“Oh.”

His kindness shatters something inside me, and I scurry past him, shut myself inside my room, sit down on the edge of my bed, and give in to big heavy tears. I don't even really know *why* I'm crying, only that it feels too good to stop.

I inhale deeply, trying to quell the torrential downpour, but more tears fall, and it's like a valve releasing in my chest. It's the tension from last night, the anxiety and adrenaline from the bike accident this morning, the worry about how things will go with Nate, my situation with my family, my future with Andrew—it all comes out with those tears, everything I've held behind lock and key for so long.

I can't actually remember the last time I cried. But now, I hiccup and snuffle. I swipe at my face and then cry some more, slow tears slipping down my cheeks as I stare out the window at the snow. I don't even care that by the time I eventually get dressed and head downstairs, my face is likely splotchy, my green eyes red-rimmed.

When I come down, Nate is sitting at the kitchen table, a piece of thread between his teeth as he bites off a knot.

True to his word, he has my jeans in his hands and he's sewing up the hole I made when I fell. He's mending them carefully, his brows tugged together in concentration.

When he notices me standing in the kitchen doorway, he doesn't look up. “It won't be perfect, sorry. My mom taught me years ago, back when I was a teenager. She was sick of my brother and me acting like we couldn't possibly learn to do something as simple as thread a needle. I think she called it weaponized incompetence.”

I smile. “Sounds like my kind of lady.”

His blue eyes peer up at me from beneath his brows, only for a moment. He sees the evidence of my tears and looks away, as if not wanting to gawk. “You would have liked her. She had hair kind of like yours. A lot darker red though. Yours is blonder.”

His use of past tense gives me pause.

“Did she pass away?” I ask, treading lightly.

He holds up the jeans to check the position of a stitch. “Ovarian cancer.”

I swallow and look down, my voice weak as I reply, “Sorry.”

“It’s been a long time now. Come see.”

He holds out the jeans for me, and though they still need a good wash, the hole near the knee is all but gone. He folded the denim in on itself in such a way that the stitches are neatly hidden inside. I don’t know exactly why him stitching up my pants is the hottest thing a man has ever done for me, but it is.

I clear my throat.

Even after only knowing Nate a short time, I know he’s tenderhearted and thoughtful. An image of him as a father leaps to mind unbidden. A little girl by his side, him patiently teaching her to read on the chair in front of the fire. He would be such a gentle dad, and the thought almost makes me tear up again.

I swallow and take the jeans. “Thanks. Should we get to work?”

He looks like he’s on the brink of saying something else. His lips part and his forehead crinkles, but then all at once he drops it. “Yeah, I’ll get us coffee.”

The rest of the day we spend at his kitchen table, working like we say we’re going to. Since my arrival in England, it’s the most productive day we’ve had. Nothing exists beyond the *Cosmos* trilogy. We don’t discuss last night. We don’t even look in the direction of the living room.

By the evening, I’m exhausted and I have a headache from keeping track of plot threads with him. His brain is on another level. The way he thinks, jotting down notes quickly, grabbing ahold of an idea and running with it while I try in vain to keep up. We drink more coffee than we should and tear through not one, not two, but *three* chocolate bars, but when we break for dinner, I feel a real sense of accomplishment—not only for

helping him with his book but for managing to avoid the topic of *us* all day.

Of course it could happen now, as we take off our work hats and settle back into life as roommates. But Nate sidesteps the issue altogether when he tells me he's heading into town. He's the one running this time, saving me the trouble. I get the cottage to myself for dinner. I fill a plate with whatever my heart desires, cheese and pickles and crackers, and I call Cat down from upstairs and feed him dinner while I read in front of the fire.

Nate doesn't come home before I go to sleep, but when I go to use the restroom in the middle of the night, I see a few boxes of tampons sitting beside my door. He got them for me while he was in town.

CHAPTER 19

SUMMER

IT'S strange that Nate and I don't discuss the night we spent together in front of the fire. Not once. Not the day after it happened, or the day after that, or the day after that. A week passes in which Nate and I work like we were supposed to work from the very beginning. If we were being graded on productivity, it would be all gold stars and perfect 100s. If we were being graded on honesty, well, we'd both be getting called into the principal's office for a stern talking to.

I know why *I'm* avoiding the topic. At least I think I've mostly got it. I try not to think about it too much because it makes my stomach hurt every time I do, and then I break out in a cold sweat and I can't meet Nate's eyes again for a few hours for fear that I'll blush and give myself away.

Nothing good would come from us rehashing things. No matter how overwhelmingly perfect Nate was, I'm not prepared to completely throw away my life with Andrew. He and I have been together for a long time. A part of me still thinks we could end up together *forever*. I can't give that up overnight, can I? I mean I'd never hear the end of it from Emma and my parents. *Ugh*.

There's also the tricky situation of Nate and me trying to preserve some semblance of a platonic work relationship...

Yes. It's settled. Everything is best left unsaid.

If Nate and I were to have a serious sit-down conversation about our hookup or were to continue what we started, who

knows how far we'd take it? Would we even be able to pull ourselves apart? Regain control? *Surface for air?*

I'm at the coffee pot in the kitchen, mulling all of this over, and no matter how much I try to remind myself of why it's wrong, the idea of tumbling into Nate's bed makes my toes curl. I know, deep down, all the very important reasons for why I'm keeping Nate at a distance might totally fly out the window if I knew how Nate felt. If he wanted...

I hear footsteps on the stairs and I shake myself. It doesn't matter.

I stand up straighter and reach for a second mug, his mug. I feel his presence behind me like I feel his presence everywhere in this house: acutely, intrinsically, painfully.

"Coffee's almost ready." I say this without looking at him because I find it's actually very hard to meet his eye these days. Almost impossible.

When I do, I swear I see emotion in them that gives me pause.

"Smells good."

He heads for the refrigerator to get the cream for me. He doesn't take his coffee with cream, so the fact that he goes out of his way every morning to get it for me is just...well, it's a real problem. I need him to start acting cruel or arrogant or selfish. That would help me sleep easier at night. I would love to hate this man.

I finally gain the courage to look up as he steps close and drops the cream on the counter. Instead of leaving, he rests his hip beside it and tilts his head, studying me while we wait for the coffee to finish brewing.

If that's what we're doing, I'll study him right back. No problem. He hasn't completely shaved his face since the day of my bicycle accident, but he's consistent about trimming his scruff now. I've thought about this *a lot*, and I think his facial hair is a sort of barometer for his feelings. By not shaving, he's telling me, point-blank, that he's uninterested in any more kissing.

“You seem tired,” he says with a look of concern.

I roll my eyes. “Well at least you didn’t say I *look* tired. That would be worse.”

“No, you look fine.”

Fine is said with a harsh edge like it was hard for him to comment on my looks at all, much less in a slightly positive way.

“I haven’t been sleeping well.” I shrug.

At night, I’ve been thinking about him and Andrew and my life as it currently stands, which is not exactly dream material.

“I can get you a better pillow if that’s part of the problem.”

The coffee pot sputters and hisses, forcing out a few last drips before finishing up.

I shake my head. “It’s fine. Thanks though.” I take the pot and pour him a full cup before pouring some for myself.

“I think we need to take a break today.”

I’m taking a sip of coffee so I have to rely on my eyebrows to do the talking for me. They arch up toward my hairline with his suggestion. *No work?!*

He nods, almost smiling. “It wouldn’t kill us, and I’m already way behind schedule. What’s one more day?”

It’s true, actually. Over the last week, I’ve stayed in contact with Joy, emailing her whenever I make it into town. She’s ecstatic that things seem to be working between Nate and me. The fact that we’re still plotting is a cause for celebration as far as she’s concerned, and I don’t think they’re interested in rocking the boat or adding any undue pressure onto Nate or me. As long as we’re chipping away at the third book, she’s happy, especially considering that so many people at InkWell assumed Nate would never start it at all.

“Do you have plans?” I ask.

He runs his fingers through his hair. It’s wavier than usual this morning—*perfect*.

“I need to stock up on a few things from a real grocery store, so I was going to head into Kendal.” My intrigue must be evident because he smiles timidly and asks, “Do you want to come?”

“Yes!”

I’ve been cooped up in the cottage for far too many days. I haven’t even made it into Sedbergh since Tuesday. Andrew and I had a long conversation during his lunch break at work that day. It was a phone call I wasn’t looking forward to at all. Over the weekend, I’d gone back and forth on whether I wanted to tell Andrew about my hookup. On one hand, I didn’t want to hurt his feelings for no reason. If Nate and I aren’t going to continue pursuing each other, there’s an argument for not telling Andrew about it at all.

On the other hand, my relationship with Andrew feels like it’s barely surviving. If I keep a secret this big from him, there’s a possibility it’ll become the final nail in the coffin for us.

So while I sat on a park bench, in the cold, outside Sedbergh’s coffee shop, I called Andrew and ripped off the Band-Aid.

“I kissed someone else this weekend” is how I initially broached the subject.

He was silent for a long pause, digesting my confession.

“Okay.” He was trying so hard to keep the judgment out of his tone, and I really appreciated that. I knew it must have been hard for him.

“We didn’t have sex, but—”

He cut me off quickly. “If you want to tell me everything that happened, you can, Summer. But also, you don’t owe me anything. We talked about this. I want us to be in a relationship, taking the next steps, moving in together.” He sighed, and I knew he was rubbing his hand down his face, exhausted by me. “You’re not ready. I know that. But I felt like I couldn’t keep going on like we were forever.”

“I’m sorry—”

“No, don’t apologize. Remember? When I asked for a break, we agreed we could see other people.”

“Have you? Seen anyone, I mean?” I desperately hoped the answer would be yes, so that we could share in the burden of guilt.

He chuckled. “No. I’ve been working like a dog. And well...” He clears his throat. “I’ve been missing you.”

His admission hurt.

“I really am so—”

“*Summer.*” He forced a laugh. “It’s fine. I swear it is. Okay?”

“Okay.”

He never asked me who I kissed, and I never volunteered the information. Now, though, sitting in Nate’s car while he drives us to Kendal, I wonder if that lie of omission will continue to haunt me.

I look down and then oh-so-carefully peer over at Nate. His face is in profile, his narrowed gaze focused on the road. He looks lost in thought, so lost he doesn’t notice me staring. I wonder what’s on his mind. I hope it’s something to do with the plot of *A Cosmic Penance*. That’s what we’re calling it now, the third book.

I should want him to be feverishly working on it, though maybe not too fast, because once we get a rough outline of the book, I’m not sure I’m needed here anymore. Surely once he starts writing, InkWell will call me home for my hero’s welcome. I can’t be expected to stay here in his cottage *forever*. The realization comes with an unhealthy twinge of sadness. I shouldn’t want to stay. This is just a business trip. My real life is waiting for me back in New York. Andrew, my parents, my job, my little cubicle on the fourteenth floor. I have an ivy plant there that someone is watering for me, a stapler I *just* bought. Even if this part of England is beautiful, I have to go home.

Nate’s gaze slides to me, and his mouth curves with a secret smile.

“You’re staring.”

Caught red-handed.

“Yes, out past your window.” I say this like *Duh, don’t flatter yourself*. “I didn’t realize how beautiful it is here.”

The lie is so smooth he doesn’t call me on it, but who cares about dumb views when I have Nate to stare at?

God. Thoughts like that are going to get me in trouble. I can’t get carried away with this silly crush I have on him. I have to think ahead a week, a month, a year.

Nate glances out the window and nods. “Yeah, this drive is one of my favorites in all of England. The farms and pastures, all the wild vines and trees...”

I smile. “You love it, don’t you? You’d go full primitive if you could. Caveman loincloth and everything.”

He has a hard time stifling his grin. “I do like running water and electricity, but I don’t miss the other stuff, endlessly scrolling on my phone... I guess I just enjoy the quiet.”

Shockingly, I get it. “I thought I’d have a harder time adjusting. I’ve been known to binge a show or two. Andrew and I—” I halt suddenly, like I’ve said something wrong. I didn’t though. I can talk about my life back in the States, and Andrew is a huge part of it.

“Andrew and you?” Nate prompts.

“We like watching reruns of *Friends*.”

He nods but doesn’t mention anything more. Maybe he’s not a big *Friends* guy. Maybe he prefers *Seinfeld*.

If there was a nice atmosphere in the car before now, I just killed it by bringing up Andrew. This is getting complicated. Nate and I should have just talked about all the awkward sexual things the day after our hookup, but now too much time has passed, and if I bring it up, it’ll seem like I’ve been thinking about it nonstop—which of course, I have. There’s barely a five-minute stretch where I don’t recall Nate’s face literally pressed between my legs!

I reach forward and lower the heat. Suddenly, it's too hot in this car.

“Once we get to Kendal, would you mind dropping me off at a coffee shop while you run errands? I need to send a few emails and stuff.”

“And stuff” mostly involves calling Andrew. We haven't talked since Tuesday, and I do worry this distance isn't good for us. Maybe I would be thinking about Nate's mouth and where I would like to feel it slightly *less* if I had more reliable communication with Andrew. I do think “out of sight, out of mind” is starting to be a problem, though I refuse to admit that to Nate.

“Sure, yeah. There's a great place I love. When I first moved to England, I'd try to work there every now and then.”

“No luck?” He looks at me deadpan, and I can't help but smile. “Come on, it's not so doom and gloom now, right? We're plotting! We're getting somewhere! I might actually convince you to leave Amelia and Marcus alone...”

His hands tighten on the wheel. “Not going to happen. I thought of another scene for her and Julian this morning, a pivotal moment in the book, actually.”

“Really?” I perk up, turning toward him with eagerness. “Something you haven't told me?”

He glances at me with a gleam in his eyes. “It came to me this morning while I was out walking.”

I scrunch my brow. “You were out walking this morning? It was freezing!” I distinctly remember waking up, feeling the chilly air in my room, and burrowing deeper under my blankets for another half hour of stolen sleep.

“I don't mind the cold. I had on proper gear.”

I blink and refocus my attention away from his good looks. “So, inspiration struck during your walk? What'd you do, etch your idea into some tree bark?”

He laughs. “I made it back to the cottage in time to write it down. Their fight, I mean.”

“Julian and Amelia?”

“Yes. While the crew is working on Kepler-452b, trying to make it habitable—”

“After they’ve explored the planet and found a few relics from the past civilizations?” I add, to confirm I understand where he’s headed.

“Yes. The crew will detect signals from a nearby star system.”

“Another advanced civilization?”

“They don’t know. It could be a whole host of things. Their telescope array will pick up radio signal activity, meaning the lifeform sending the signal would have to be advanced.”

“What do they do?”

“The crew will be divided, Amelia versus Julian with each of them leading the charge, for or against trying to establish contact.”

“Amelia will want to remain hidden, right? To avoid potential threats.”

He nods. “Yes. She will want to mitigate risk for her crew and avoid interference with their mission.”

“And Julian—adventurous, bold, grab-life-by-the-horns Julian—will want to contact them immediately,” I wager.

“That’s the plan.”

“I like it. More conflict to drive the plot. Will Marcus go head to head with Julian as well or let Amelia fight her own battle?”

“He’s actually going to side with Julian.”

“WHAT?”

If *I* were the one driving, we’d be off the road colliding into a snowbank.

“Marcus is blindly loyal to Amelia,” I protest. “He always has been!”

Nate nods in agreement. “Except for now. It’s the beginning of the end. This, for her, will be a huge sign that things have changed between them. The relationship she has long relied on is no longer steadfast.”

“Wild.” I shake my head. “You know you’re going to piss off so many readers.”

Me. I’M THE READER!

He shrugs, unbothered. “They’ll be mad one way or another. I can’t imagine many of them were pulling for Marcus anyway.”

I throw my hand up dramatically. “I was! I’ve been Team Marcus since book one!”

“Well...” He looks over at me with a guilty smile. “Maybe you were wrong.”

“Oh, no. That’s it. Now you’ve really done it. Don’t be shocked when you read a scathing review from Anonymous1093 highlighting all of Marcus’ wonderful qualities.”

“Send it to me. I’ll frame it.”

I throw my head back and laugh. Nate looks over, smiling.

We spend the rest of the drive to Kendal discussing the plot. It’s hard to believe, but it’s actually starting to take shape.

When Nate drops me on the curb outside the coffee shop with a promise that he’ll return to retrieve me in two hours, I salute him then spin around on my heels, but I don’t go inside right away.

I’m in a new town, and it’s *huge* compared to Sedbergh. The cafe Nate dropped me at is on a main road lined with shops and restaurants nestled inside old stone buildings, so I take full advantage. When I see an artisan shop, I can’t help but dip inside. There’s a short man behind the counter wearing a stained scarlet apron and round glasses. He nods in greeting and tells me to ask him if I have any questions. The narrow space is lined with paper goods, mainly thick journals bound in varying shades of saturated red and teal and brown leather. I

can't help but scoop two up: one for me and one for a gift. I'm not sure who I'll give it to just yet. No one in my life journals like I do. Emma would think it was pretty, but she'd end up sticking it in a drawer somewhere and forgetting about it. My mom could maybe make use of it, jotting down recipes and things, but she keeps a no-nonsense binder in her pantry. Each recipe is printed and laminated, hole-punched and categorized: entrees, appetizers, breads, desserts, etc. The thing would probably just collect dust on her shelf.

Oh well.

I strike up a conversation with the owner and tell him I'm only in town for a day.

“Are there any other shops I should see before I leave?”

With a mischievous smile, he points me in the direction of the chocolatier next door. Little does he know how appropriate this recommendation is. I could buy out the entire place, but because Nate and I should really learn to restrain ourselves *somewhat* and because the bars cost more than I make in an hour, I only buy two: one with toffee and sea salt and the other with orange shavings and almonds.

I could spend the rest of the day exploring Kendal, but my wallet is screaming at me to get it together, I need to call Andrew, and I actually need to put in at least an hour of work. I have no idea what's waiting for me in my inbox, so I head to the coffee shop.

“What can I get you, love?” asks the petite barista behind the counter. Her Scottish accent is heavy, which isn't all that surprising considering how close we are to the border of Scotland.

“Just a cappuccino, please.”

“Full fat milk alright?”

“Perfect.” I grin.

She and I chat while she makes my drink.

“See you went down to Fred's shop? Pick up a journal?”

“Two,” I say, lifting them up out of the bag enough that she can get a peek at them.

“Love the blue one! I have too many to count myself. It’s dangerous working down the street,” she says before turning toward the espresso machine.

I leave a small tip, and then once I have my drink, I set up at a table near the counter only because it’s fun to hear people as they order and chat. I like the hum of conversation around me, so different from the quiet of the cottage.

Could I live like Nate does? Day in and day out? Yes. Could a nerdy bookworm enjoy a storybook cottage? Absolutely I could, but it’s a silly thing to think about. Soon enough I’ll be headed back to the hustle and bustle of the city. I’m sure it’ll feel jarring at first. The taxis the lights the people the rush the sirens the horns the pressure to dress cool and be cool and have money and be successful.

Here, in northern England, I’ve only cared about my paycheck insofar as it provides me the means to indulge in chocolate and journals. I guess if I were to stay longer, I would want to get a nice winter coat. Beyond that, none of it seems to matter. Alice ekes out a living running her small book shop and Mike and Oliver work on their family’s farm. Even Nate’s wealth is hidden away to the point that I doubt very many people realize just how much he’s sitting on. I know from working on the publisher side of things that his royalty checks are eye-popping. I asked him the other day if he sold his apartment in New York when he moved to England, and he shyly mentioned that he likes to keep it for when he travels. An apartment in Manhattan and a country cottage in England? I can’t imagine!

By the time I’m done people-watching and drinking my cappuccino, I get to work. I’m lucky there are only a few emails I need to glance through: company-wide newsletters, updated book release schedules, things that get forwarded en masse. Joy hasn’t emailed me directly for another update since we spoke on Tuesday. She’s giving me a long leash and I appreciate it, but maybe if she were breathing down my neck a little more, I would have had an easier time focusing on what

really matters with Nate. Work, work, work! That's what I should be caring about, not the rest. Not his dimpled smile and his callused hands and his perfect blue eyes.

I puff out an unsteady breath and scramble for my phone so I can call Andrew. I have excellent cell reception and I plan to use it.

It's late morning here, so there's a chance Andrew will be up and getting ready for work back in the States. If not, at least he'll see my missed call at some point and know I tried to reach him; he'll appreciate it.

Surprisingly though, he answers straightaway.

"Summer!" His voice is excited and nearly breathless.

Did he just finish a workout? It's not really like him.

I smile. "*Hey*. Didn't expect you'd be up. It's only a little past 6:00 there, right?"

"Nope. It's actually just past 11:00."

I frown and pull my phone away from my ear to check the time.

It's 11:17 a.m. *here*.

"Are you on a work trip?"

It's a silly question considering Andrew never travels. He works long, grueling hours from his cubicle in a high-rise one block from Wall Street. His only commute is his short walk home to his apartment every night.

"Work trip? No... This is definitely for pleasure."

I give a short laugh, still confused. "What are you talking about? Are you in New York?"

"No, actually I'm in Leeds."

I press the phone closer to my ear even though it's not overly loud in the coffee shop.

"You're where?" My voice is filled with wonder. Surely I heard him wrong.

He laughs. "*Leeds. England.*"

My breath stalls in my chest. “Oh my god.”

“I know. It’s a little crazy, but it felt like I needed to take a chance on us.”

“*Oh my god.*”

I say it again, slower this time. My rapid-fire blinking isn’t helping to piece two and two together. I stand from my chair, sweep my laptop into my bag, and rush out of the coffee shop.

“What do you mean, Andrew? Are you seriously in England?”

“Yes.” He laughs again, a little nervous. “I’m here.”

I feel like I might start to hyperventilate. I need a paper bag. A doctor!

“You’re here,” I say, processing the news out loud.

This is completely unexpected. Andrew was the one to break up with me *twice*, though I didn’t even blame him this last time. He had to do it. He was making good on an ultimatum. I needed to get serious about us or he was going to walk away, and he did.

But now he’s here, performing some kind of grand gesture, and I don’t even know what to say.

What do I say?!

I press my hand to my forehead. “Andrew, I’m freaking out a little.”

I’m firing from the hip. Later, I’m sure I’ll regret not tempering my initial reaction better, but right now, I can’t help it. I’m just so shocked he’s here. Andrew has never been an over-the-top romantic guy. Our big nights out for anniversaries or birthdays involve reservations shared via e-calendars.

“I feel the same way actually. You know I’ve never been to England...”

But he’s here now. Expecting to see me.

He’s in Leeds and I’m in Kendal and I don’t even have my own car. *I’m here with Nate!*

“Give me your address and I’ll head your way.”

I kneel down to take a seat on the sidewalk, but I don’t make it. I just sort of bend over like I’m going to heave.

“I don’t...I don’t have the address on me. This is all so complicated. Andrew, you’re here...” At this moment, my brain screams at me to say something positive. “And I’m *so happy*. I am. I can’t wait to see you.”

I’m just not sure how to make that happen.

I’ve been aware of people on the sidewalk, giving me a wide berth as they pass by like they’re worried about getting too close to the girl having a public meltdown. I don’t blame them. Honestly, it’d probably be best to cross the street or reroute altogether.

But then someone veers too close, closer, and it’s not until the person is right in front of me that I peer up to see Nate standing there, clutching bags. He sets them on the sidewalk then reaches down to grip my arm and help me stand.

I stare into his blue eyes. He doesn’t let go of me. He looks worried, but he doesn’t say anything. He sees the phone pressed to my ear, and he must be imagining the worst kind of news.

Are you okay? he mouths.

I nod and mouth back, *Andrew*.

His grip eases and his expression softens, but he doesn’t let up altogether.

“Where are you staying?” I ask Andrew.

“Well...obviously I planned to stay with you—”

I squeeze my eyes closed for a moment. “But don’t you remember? It’s not like I’m at a hotel. I’m staying with the author I’m working with.”

Nate seems so calm now when he shakes his head. “Of course he can stay.”

This is said loud enough for Andrew to hear. No game of telephone here. No way for me to gloss over the truth.

Nate continues, “It’s fine. Give him my address.”

The situation is now fully out of my control. Because Nate is here, listening in on the conversation, there’s no way for me to keep everything separate. No, Andrew can’t stay at Nate’s house. No, they can’t meet. I would have figured out some other solution, but it’s too late now.

Nate motions for my phone, and I hand it to him because what else can I do? My stomach pinches into a tight knot as he gives Andrew the directions for how to get to his cottage, and just like that, the plan is set in motion.

After Nate hangs up, he hands me my phone, and I stare down at it, wondering what would have happened if we hadn’t gone into town today, if I didn’t have cell service. What was Andrew’s plan?

Oh right. He had no plan. That’s the romance aspect I’m supposed to be appreciating, his willingness to fly overseas with nothing but hope.

We walk to Nate’s car in silence, load in our bags, and then start the twenty-minute drive back to Sedbergh. Once we’re outside of Kendal, back among the rolling hills and the wild landscape, I finally feel like I can speak again.

“I didn’t invite him,” I say, wincing at how that sounds. Like Andrew is some interloper when he’s not. He’s a great guy. I’m just doing a bad job of processing everything. I can’t seem to say the right thing.

“It’s no problem,” Nate assures me.

“I just don’t want you thinking I told him to come here because *now* would obviously be a bad time for him to visit.” Then, I panic over the idea that Nate is thinking I’m referring to what happened between us, which I *am*, but our work is also a factor in this, however small. “Because we’ve been on such a roll with the book and I’m already putting you out. I would never expect you to be okay with me inviting someone else to stay at your cottage.”

“I really don’t mind, Summer.”

“No?”

I'm not buying it.

He adjusts his hands on the steering wheel and stares straight ahead, never taking his eyes off the road. "Not at all."

His composure is surprising. I mean, he *really* must not have any feelings for me because if the situation were reversed and I were in his shoes, if one of his ex-girlfriends just popped up out of the blue, the last thing I would be doing is inviting her over to stay. *Reunite somewhere else! Where I don't have to see it! In Tibet for all I care!*

"Tell him he can stay a few days," Nate adds, his eyes slicing over to me for a brief moment. "The poor guy flew all the way over here to see you."

I cross my arms and turn to look out my window, inexplicably annoyed. "Yeah, okay."

I should probably be thanking Nate for his generosity, but I can't seem to get there. I have too much on the tip of my tongue, too many questions I want answered instead.

I sigh, let my head fall back against the headrest, and close my eyes, trying to mentally prepare for what's about to happen when I see Andrew.

CHAPTER 20

NATE

ON PAPER, I'm cool and calm. I'm being a generous host and a nice guy.

Inside, I'm filled with murderous rage. At least *I think* this is murderous rage. I'm not sure because I've never murdered someone before, but there's a first time for everything!

Back at the cottage, I'm unloading bags out of my trunk, all the things I just bought in Kendal. Meanwhile, Summer stands just to my right, leaning in to grab the heaviest bag.

"Here, let me get that," she says.

"I'm fine."

"But—"

"*Summer.*"

My tone is harsh enough that she freezes and moves away with her hands up. "Right, okay. You've got it. Clearly."

I walk around her with the bags and stomp into the house. Presumably, Andrew is having a driver bring him up from Leeds. The trip takes two hours, which means by my count, Summer and I have another hour and a half to kill before he gets here.

Kill. *There's a word I like.*

Clearly, I'm not handling this well, but there's good reason for that. Try as I might—and I have tried—there is no getting around the issue that I want Summer. I want her every second of every day.

My head has been a jumbled mess lately, ever since the night she let me kiss her. Well, no. That discounts everything that happened before. If I'm being honest, this all started the very first day Summer arrived at my cottage, broken suitcase and all.

Fuck me.

I've been so restrained with her, as restrained as possible. Last weekend, she let me touch her and taste her and—

It was heaven. Laying Summer down in front of my fire, feeling her respond to my every touch was more than a little dangerous; it was ludicrous. I should have had more sense than to take things too far with her. While I can delude myself with the notion that it's all okay because we didn't have sex, it doesn't matter. I felt her in ways I shouldn't have. *I saw her*, the fragile, beautiful girl naked before me, and I'm so hungry for more I'm surprised I can even look at her without pulling her against me and taking everything I want.

As far as I know, this is all one-sided. I have no clue how Summer is feeling about us because she and I haven't talked about it. But going off of the fact that the morning after she and I fooled around, she tried to escape on my bicycle, injuring herself in her attempt to get away from me, I'd say she's not looking for a round two.

Even if she were, I know better. Just because I want Summer, doesn't mean I can have her.

But I'm beginning to feel like it's already out of my hands. I stare at her too much. I notice everything about her. Every time her lips curl into a smile, every time her eyes alight with conviction while we argue over a plot point, every moment I have to sit across from her at my kitchen table while we share a simple meal—there's a fire burning inside me. Can't she tell? Can't she see what I'm doing a poor job of hiding?

Bloody hell.

Sure! Let's let Andrew come over. That's just fucking great. I'd love to meet the boyfriend!

Yes, *boyfriend*. I know Summer said she and Andrew are on a break and I believe her about that, but no guy hops on an international flight for a girl he has lukewarm feelings about. Andrew wants Summer. Now the question is, what does Summer want?

Inside the cottage, I sling a bag down onto my kitchen counter with a *bang* and realize I've got to get a handle on my temper. Summer comes in through the back door quietly, like she's treading on thin ice, scared of me all of a sudden. I'd be scared of me too.

"I really appreciate that you're letting Andrew come here."

With my back to her, I can squeeze my eyes closed and count to three before I respond with a cavalier shrug. "It's fine."

"You'll like him, I bet."

Ha, bet I won't!

"He's nice," she adds.

It's taken a herculean effort to keep my cool the entire drive back from Kendal, and I need a break. "Why don't you go make sure there's a spare towel for him upstairs. I assume he's staying in your room?"

Say no. Say he'll be on the couch. Or better yet, out in the shed. I can get him some hay to sleep on. Jesus slept in a manger, so can Andrew.

"Oh...I hadn't thought about it, but I guess so. The daybed would probably fit us both."

Of course I immediately imagine them in bed together, pressed close.

"He's allergic to cats though, so I should probably put Cat in your room if that's okay."

Cat's usually in my room all the time anyway, or he was pre-Summer.

"Sounds good."

She eyes me suspiciously as if she knows that's just a generic automated response. I'd better mix it up with a well-timed "Whoa, that's crazy" or "No way" so I can throw her off the scent of my feigned indifference.

Not that it really matters; I'm not staying much longer. I won't be here for their reunion. I don't want to see it. I haven't chopped firewood in a week and we're running low so I could go out and do that, but for now, I think I'll head into Sedbergh and see if Alice is at the shop. If she's not, I'll go to the pub.

I don't even tell Summer I'm leaving. While she's upstairs checking on the towel—or more likely looking through her clothes for the sexiest reunion outfit she can pick—I head straight out the door and get into my car. There's no way around it. I worry how close I am to crumbling beneath the weight of these feelings, and once I do, once she knows the truth, there's no going back.

If she wants Andrew, I'll make it easy on her and get out of the way, at least for a few hours.

The bell chimes over the door of Main Street Books.

I've always loved Alice's shop. I contemplated opening one of my own bookstores here, but it's a lot of work and I'd really only be playing a shop owner when what I actually want to do is own an entire store full of books that I can read at my leisure without anyone bothering me. With that business model, I'd never turn a profit.

There's a customer with Alice today, an old man wearing a green tweed driving cap and relying heavily on a hand-carved cane. He has her full focus over near the antiquarian books. Those are the real showstoppers, the ones I fantasize about buying every time I come in here. I will come away with one of them eventually, either an early edition *Moby Dick* or a 1950s copy of *Casino Royale* by Ian Fleming.

Alice sees me and gives a little wave but otherwise stays focused on her customer. She must be close to making a deal,

and I'm happy for her. With the right sale, Alice could cover overhead at the store for months.

I busy myself browsing the aisles. Since Summer's arrival, I haven't been reading as much as I usually do so I'm not in the market for anything new, but this is part of my distraction plan. I can't go home, so I have to linger here.

It could be worse. At least I'm among my favorite things.

I check my watch and confirm that Andrew will be passing through Sedbergh anytime now on his way to the cottage. With Alice's shop right on Main Street, I could theoretically see him drive by, but I have no idea what car he's in. Still, that doesn't stop me from craning my neck every time I hear tires in the snow outside.

Pathetic. I've fully lost it.

"I'll think on it," I hear the man tell Alice in a heavy English accent.

When I turn back, I see her hold out a business card for him to take. "Of course, I understand. The shop will be open again tomorrow, but not Sunday."

She helps him to the shop door where a driver waits to escort him to his car.

Alice's smile only drops once she steps back inside, her back to the street. "I was hoping that would go differently."

"Big fish?"

"*Huge.*"

I look out to see the man getting into a vintage Range Rover. Big fish indeed. "Maybe he'll be back," I tell her, offering up a conciliatory smile. "He seemed really interested."

"Yes, in *looking*," she says hopelessly. "So many people come here just to window shop. He was browsing for over an hour. He made me take out most every book I have in that back cabinet." She shakes her head like she can't believe she wasted so much time. Then she heads toward the pile of papers waiting for her on the counter.

“Right, well I’ll buy one. How’s that? Get the Fleming.”

She laughs and shoots me a droll look. “I’m not selling you a book.”

“Why not?”

“Because you don’t want it. Not *really*. You’re only trying to be nice.”

“Nice?” I pfft air out of my mouth like she’s crazy. “Ask Summer how nice I am.”

She cocks an eyebrow, curious.

“Never mind. Forget I said that.”

I don’t know what I was thinking. I don’t want to invite Alice into this. The last thing I need is more opinions on a situation I’m actively trying to escape.

“How is it with her at the cottage? Must be a little strange. I never got the sense that you enjoy people in your space.”

“It’s good,” I insist. “She fits.”

It’s weird how that happens. I thought every little thing would annoy me, from the way Summer washes the dishes to the way she hangs her bras out to dry, but she’s assimilated so easily, or maybe I have. The last time I had a roommate, it was in college, and he would leave his takeout containers in the fridge for weeks, letting them grow into science experiments before I’d eventually toss them into the trash when he wasn’t home.

“Did you get rid of my spaghetti?” he’d ask, like he was actually going to eat the damn stuff.

“You mean the green mutinous monster that was once your spaghetti? Yeah, I shoved it down the trash chute so it wouldn’t kill us in our sleep.”

I’ve never lived with a girlfriend, and my last relationship was serious enough to warrant it, serious enough to send me into a downward spiral when it ended.

I’ve been so private for so long now, isolated and lonely. I’m not sure if things would have ever changed had Summer

not arrived. There's never been someone who embodies her name as much as she does. I didn't want to see it before, but now it's so obvious she's been a muse to me, a light to draw from—summer in the midst of a harsh winter.

Alice gives me a funny look. “You seem like you're thinking over something really difficult.”

Yes, well, I am.

CHAPTER 21

SUMMER

PATTERNS IN RELATIONSHIPS don't form overnight, and I don't know exactly when my sister and I set our roles in concrete. The way Emma decides where we meet for dinner, what time we should see a movie, how I should wear my hair, the color of eyeshadow that most complements my features. It's not a two-way street, and if I were to mention that I don't really *love* that French bistro she's obsessed with or that I actually don't think I like my hair pin-straight, it would unsettle the balance of our relationship beyond recognition.

I idolized Emma as a child, naming my Barbies and dolls after her. I wanted to be just like her: older, smart, *cool*. There was a big enough age gap between us—eight years—that I heard about her successes the way people hear about Napoleon's conquests or Einstein's genius.

My brother Ben was just as successful, but he didn't shine like Emma. He wasn't the star of our family—she was. *Is*.

Emma set me up with Andrew. After our blind date ended, she was the first person I called.

“Well? How did it go?!” she asked excitedly.

“Umm...”

“I bet it was overwhelming,” she supplied for me.

“A little,” I admitted sheepishly.

“I knew it would be. Don't sweat it. He's a little older than you and at a different stage in his life, but *that's a good thing*,

Summer. That's what you need."

Emma's high opinion of him was contagious to the point that it became impossible to extricate my feelings for Andrew from hers. We collectively thought I should go on a second date, and when that went well, it only made sense to accept a third.

She's been Andrew's and my biggest cheerleader. Andrew and Lincoln's parents belong to the same sailing club in Connecticut. On more than one occasion, Emma has mentioned how fun it will be to spend summers there together as a family, letting the cousins grow up on the water. That seemed as nice a future as any I could envision for myself.

But as Andrew's car pulls up outside Nate's cottage and I step through the doorway in my jacket and gloves, I realize just how far from that idyllic New England summer I've found myself.

Andrew unfolds out of the back seat and stands. He's wearing jeans and nice, freshly oiled boots. His cashmere sweater is tucked beneath a sharp camel-colored jacket, and despite having just taken an international flight and a long car ride north from Leeds, his short brown hair looks immaculate, his smile handsome and wide as he takes me in on the doorstep.

Andrew is not so handsome that he would draw attention on the street, but he's attractive enough that paired with his personality and work ethic, he's a real catch, especially for some Upper West Side socialite looking to sink her teeth into an investment banker whose upbringing and pedigree check all the right boxes. All of that is wasted on me.

He's come such a long way to see me and I should go to him, so I do, walking up until I'm close enough that he can wrap me in a tight hug. I haven't seen him in a few months, but there's still so much comfort and familiarity: his subtle cologne, the specific placement of his arms around my back, his voice as he leans down and tells me, "I've really missed you."

The driver gets Andrew's suitcase out of the trunk, and Andrew steps away from me in time to wince as the driver sets it on the snow. The suitcase is new. I remember sitting beside him on the couch when he bought it. It took weeks of researching the very best, top-of-the-line luggage, a detailed comparison chart between colors and sizes. The amount of thought people put into say, having a baby, Andrew puts into every single decision in life, weighing the pros and cons, wanting everything perfect.

It bothers him that I don't put the same care and attention into decisions. We're opposites in that way. I'll wash a pan after dinner and set it out to dry. Andrew will come up behind me and find all the ways I managed to screw it up royally. "*Summer, it's not even close to being clean.*"

"Thank you," Andrew says now, pulling his wallet out of his back pocket to tip the driver generously. Then he takes his suitcase in hand and leads me toward the door of the cottage. "Hell of a place to be. Stuck in the middle of nowhere." He laughs as we go inside.

He stops in the entryway to set down his suitcase and take off his boots, and it's immediately jarring to have him in this place. His are the only designer labels in the cottage, the only new and shiny things for miles. He looks like a big bad businessman come to tear this place down so he can build a row of beige condominiums.

Once he's down to his black socks, he pokes his head into the living room then turns back around to inspect the kitchen.

"It's nice, isn't it?" I ask, feeling defensive. I want to preempt any comments that might hurt my feelings. Already, I'm protective of this place.

"Small, but yes, I can see why you like it." His warm brown eyes cut back to me, and he turns slowly, really looking me over for the first time since he arrived. His eyes soften as he tilts his head, smiling at me in a way that has always made me feel beautiful. "Where's the author? Nathaniel?"

"Not here—"

I'm barely done with the second word before Andrew is on me, leaning down and pressing his mouth to mine.

It's a reunion kiss and it does steal my breath like it's meant to, but more so out of shock than anything. Our teeth clatter together. My hands go up to press against his chest and push him away. I laugh as he steps back. "I'm sorry, you just surprised me."

My cheeks are beet red and hot with embarrassment.

I look away before forcing myself to meet his gaze again. Andrew has been in my life for so long, but for some reason right now he feels like a total stranger to me. I focus on the fine details, hoping they'll help bring him into focus. His nose is ever-so-slightly crooked from when he broke it in a lacrosse game in high school. His smile is always a little higher on the right side.

He laughs too and shakes his head. "Sorry. Maybe I should have led with a handshake or something before I just went for it."

"No, it's okay."

It's on the tip of my tongue to suggest we try again, for real this time, but I'm not there yet. My heart is beating too fast and my gaze is jumping around, like I'm scared to even look at him. I'm unsettled and uncomfortable and I think we should just move on from kissing for the time being.

Andrew senses my unease, and I know he's not happy about it. His frustration is evident in the flat line of his mouth, but he doesn't say anything. He sighs and nods, looking away as he turns to step into the kitchen.

"Why don't I get you some water?" I suggest. "Or are you hungry? I can make you something to eat."

"I'm not hungry, thanks. Water would be nice. Wine would be even better."

I force a smile. "Wine it is."

This is not the reunion he was expecting. I know Andrew and I know he would have calculated all the risks and benefits

of flying over here to see me. As far as he knows, *he's* the one who broke up with me. *He* has the upper hand here, but then our relationship has never worked that way. Andrew has always been more invested and more demanding of me.

He was the one to push us to become official, claiming the boyfriend and girlfriend title after only a handful of dates. He was the one to say I love you first. It was our first Christmas together and he purchased me a pair of diamond stud earrings, massive and sparkling. They were beautiful but not something I would normally pick out for myself. As I stared down at them, Emma gasped. "*Andrew, those are stunning.*" And like always, it was her reaction that gave me the blueprint for my own. "*Yes, wow. They're stunning, Andrew. Thank you.*"

Then he leaned in, and while my family looked on, he whispered in my ear, "*I love you.*"

Only it wasn't quite a whisper and everyone was watching us, looking at me for my reaction. I had no say in the matter. I repeated it back to him because I cared enough about him that I didn't want to hurt his feelings in front of everyone, and in a way, that proved something. I did care about him at least that much. Lincoln purchased Emma a coordinating pair of earrings. Apparently, the guys had gone to the jewelry store together and crafted this entire scheme. Emma put her studs on right away and I did the same. We squeezed together for a photo and everyone oohed and ahhed over us. I was so happy because they were happy.

"How was your flight?" I ask as I reach for a bottle of red, knowing Andrew will like it.

"No complaints."

I'm sure he flew first class, which I can't fault him for. If I had the means to travel in luxury, I would probably do the same. He would have never survived in my economy seat on the way over here, not with the man beside me openly weeping at the end of *Ratatouille* or the woman in front of me unwrapping a tuna melt that had been concealed beneath her seat for the first seven hours of the flight.

I work on uncorking the wine bottle as Andrew tugs out a seat at the kitchen table.

“I didn’t realize people still lived this way. Is that a wood-burning fireplace?”

I smile at him. “Yes, what’d you expect?”

Andrew has a fireplace in his apartment, but it’s flush to the wall, and the blue flames dance behind glass. I don’t think it puts off any heat; it’s purely for aesthetics.

“Don’t tell me he chops his own wood,” Andrew says with a teasing smile. “You’re really roughing it out here, Summer.”

I pour him a glass of wine and set it down in front of him with a sarcastic smile. “Oh yes, roughing it.”

But he’s right, in some ways I am.

“There’s nowhere to order takeout,” I tell him, taking the seat across from him at the table. He’s in my usual seat, and I’m where Nate usually sits. For some reason, I’m happy this is the arrangement. I would have felt bad if it were the other way around.

Andrew feigns a heart attack, and I laugh.

“No pizza?” He asks like he’s horrified by the concept.

“Nope.”

“No Thai?”

I shake my head.

“No *sushi*?!”

“Nothing.”

“You’re going to waste away.”

I think of the dinner party we had the other night, all the delicious food we shared with Nate and his friends. “We’ve been cooking a lot,” I tell Andrew.

He looks like he’s having a hard time wrapping his head around this. No one we know cooks. Outside of the fact that everyone works long hours, kitchen space is not a top priority

in most Manhattan apartments. It's more convenient to eat out or pick something up on your way home from the office.

“Had I known you were living like this, I would have figured out a way to bring you something from Satsuki,” he tells me with a wink.

That's our favorite sushi place. We used to go there every other week, but I haven't been since our last breakup a few months ago.

God, I can't believe it's been that long. I doubt he thought our break would last a week, let alone a few months. I know he's been waiting for me to come back to him with pleading hands, resolute about my future with him.

“How have things been for you? With work and everything?”

He's studying me now, and I get the sense that our thoughts have drifted to the same place. Mention of Satsuki has brought back a flood of memories for the both of us.

He puffs out a heavy breath then reaches for his wine glass. “Work has been *work*. You know how it goes.”

Outside of my parents and siblings, Andrew is the most driven person I know. He has clear-cut goals for himself that aren't just centered around productivity and his net worth. I know he wants to eventually move back to Connecticut and follow in his parents' footsteps. I know if I were only more willing, he would have already proposed. He would have tackled wedding planning, paid for all of it, and he would have done it with a smile on his face because that's just the way Andrew is. Emma has made it clear how lucky I am. We've had dozens of conversations about how many of her girlfriends would *die* to be in my shoes. These conversations never have the effect of making me feel lucky, though, more so just... ungrateful, like I'm looking a gift horse in the mouth. Like I don't know how to get out of my own way and accept happiness for what it is rather than what it could be.

No one needs to explain to me all the ways Andrew is a total package. I know that. *He* is not the problem, I am. My

inability to commit to Andrew feeds on my insecurities about my general disinterest in relationships and love in general. I've pushed myself on Andrew for so long because deep down I'm scared there's something broken inside me, scared I'm not like everyone else.

For a while, Andrew and I catch up at the kitchen table, talking about his work and the last time he saw Emma and Lincoln out for dinner a few days ago. He told them he was planning to come here and surprise me, and Emma teared up at the table.

I'm pouring more wine into Andrew's glass just as the back door opens, and I flinch, startled by Nate's presence. I didn't even hear his car pull up outside. The headlights should have been a dead giveaway, but somehow I missed them, and now he's here, standing on the threshold, frozen as he looks between Andrew and me.

Andrew's neat appearance only intensifies Nate's gruffness. His hair is mussed from his hands, and the scruff on his chin and jaw is a day past needing to be trimmed. His blue eyes are startling, icy and beautiful.

I jump to my feet, cognizant of how strange it must be for Nate to have one visitor in his cottage, let alone two. I feel weird being here with Andrew, and if there were any other place for us to stay, I wouldn't be here right now, in his space. Andrew follows suit, standing up and coming to stand beside me, like we're a united front.

"Nathaniel, wow. Huge fan." Andrew steps forward, holding out his hand. "I'm Andrew Miller."

Nate looks at Andrew with this pinched expression that's hard to discern. *Hatred? Anger? Annoyance?*

It's such a long, awkward moment between Andrew offering his hand and Nate actually reaching out to shake it that I almost laugh or say something to help ease the tension.

Differences between them leap out at me. I didn't realize just how tall and broad-shouldered Nate is, masculine in a way that makes me feel for Andrew. He's not so much smaller than

him, just slender in a way that comes from spending most of his waking hours hunched over a desk.

“Great place you have here. Really cool location.”

Nate doesn't respond to this, doesn't even seem on the cusp of opening his mouth, and the longer Nate stays silent, the more Andrew feels like he needs to fill the void.

“My grandparents have a cabin in Upstate New York that reminds me a lot of this. Rustic and off the beaten path. We'd go up there a lot when I was a kid. Kayaked a bunch. Summer, you remember visiting?”

I nod, never taking my eyes off Nate, but he won't look at me. His gaze is focused on Andrew, and he still hasn't said a word! I'm getting more annoyed with him by the second. It's clear he's been alone in this cottage for too damn long because you can't just be this way, silent and surly. I hate him a little for the way he's acting. What has Andrew done to him? Absolutely nothing. He should be aiming those daggers *my* way.

“Where did you go?” I ask him, my tone a little rough.

It gets his attention and he finally looks at me, but his expression doesn't ease. If anything, it hardens.

“I popped down to Alice's shop.” He drops Andrew's hand and brushes past us to scoop our bottle of wine off the table. “What are you two drinking?” He reads the label then his eyebrows lift with intent. “*Romantic.*”

He drops it back down with a heavy *thunk* and looks to me, his eyes hard and unyielding.

Oh yes, he's furious.

I knew, of course, when I picked that wine that it's Nate's favorite. I figured Andrew would like it too. I didn't realize Nate would feel so proprietary about it. I'll buy him a new bottle. *Two*, even!

“There's some left, enough for a glass if you'd like to join us,” I say through clenched teeth.

What I really want to do is lean in and pinch his ear and use it to yank him into the next room like a bent-out-of-shape grandma before hissing, *What's the matter with you!?*

“I haven’t had supper yet,” he says by way of rejection before heading over to inspect the contents of the refrigerator.

Andrew clears his throat, looking to me for feedback before he speaks up again. “Well, I really appreciate you taking me in on such short notice. I didn’t mean to impose...”

Nate doesn’t say anything, just starts tugging things out and dropping them onto the counter: Italian sausage, ricotta cheese, basil.

I shake my head at Andrew, a subtle way to let him know to just stop trying. Clearly, Nate isn’t in a friendly mood at the moment, and considering we’re both depending on him for lodging, maybe it’s best we don’t test it. Or at least not Andrew. It seems I, however, can do whatever I want, because before I know it, I’m stomping over to Nate and grabbing his arm, leading him toward the stairs while ignoring his protests.

“I’m about to make food—”

“Yes, we’ll get to that in a second. There’s something upstairs I need you to take care of first.”

Either I’m the strongest human ever or Nate doesn’t put up much of a protest as I fist his shirtsleeve and drag him after me. Once we’re upstairs, I worry our conversation will carry if we stay out in the hall, so I push him into my room and shut the door behind me.

I whirl around and look at him, standing there looking confidently at ease. He’s not the least bit remorseful about his actions over the last few minutes.

“What’s gotten into you? Why are you being like this?”

Nate fixes his shirt and looks at me drolly. “This is how I greet everybody. Don’t you remember the night we met?”

I lower my eyebrows menacingly. “Very funny. Just knock it off, will you? Andrew doesn’t deserve this.”

Nate's jaw hardens infinitesimally. "I haven't done anything to him."

"Well you've completely ignored him. It's rude to act like he's not even here, talking to you. Be polite."

He tips his chin up in defiance. "I'll be however the hell I want to be considering this is my cottage and you're *my* guest."

"*We're* your guests. Me *and Andrew*."

He sniffs and looks away, wiping his hand down his jaw. Something dawns and he looks around, curious now. "You rearranged the room."

"Well yes, it wasn't in good shape before. I put a few things in the closet and cleared off the desk. I stole that pretty vase from downstairs, and don't even *think* about taking it back."

He smirks at my tone. I secretly think he enjoys when I'm like this—combative and hotheaded. That amusement in his eyes tugs the invisible tether between us. It's always there, always pulling me toward him. Even now.

"When we go back downstairs, are you going to be nice?"

Nate's eyebrows arch and he drags his hand through his hair. "Nice? You think I have it in me?"

"You've been nice to me before. On occasion."

That smile again. Always so tempting...

I walk over, prepared to poke him in the chest until he falls into compliance, but the closer I get, the less I think it's a good idea to touch him at all. Nate watches me approach with a predator's focus, his gaze on my face, and then, more intently, on my mouth. Someone has sucked every bit of oxygen out of the room as we stand facing each other.

I've forgotten my objective in bringing him up here. Was it to argue or to...

I have to stop myself from leaning forward. It's a physical ache, but Andrew is downstairs and everything is a mess and

I'm mostly to blame for that.

"We should go back down," I say, my voice weak and flimsy. I could easily be persuaded to stay.

Nate doesn't move, and I realize I'm trembling now, nervous about what we're about to do. Nate has this way of looking at me like he's using a fine-tooth comb. He roves over all the parts of me that were carelessly tossed aside by everyone who came before him. Until now, I was part ghost, but Nate sees everything, even my secrets. I suspect he already knows what I'm trying so hard to fight against. With that realization, I suddenly feel so exposed and vulnerable. A shiver racks my spine and I whip open the door so I can head back down to Andrew. Nate and I have been up here long enough.

CHAPTER 22

SUMMER

I'VE NEVER EXPERIENCED A MORE tense dinner than this one, not even when Nate and I sat across the table from each other at The Dalesman Country Inn. The scraping of our silverware across our plates is the only sound beyond the crackling fire. Andrew picks up his wine glass, takes a drink, sets it down. I adjust my napkin, clear my throat. Andrew has tried and tried *and tried* to get a conversation going, but Nate is unwilling to reciprocate and I'm no help either.

When Nate and I came back downstairs after our chat in my room, Nate insisted on cooking *alone*, so I took Andrew into the living room to talk, but I wasn't sure which topics were safe. Our past, present, and future seemed totally off limits, at least while Nate was in earshot, which left very little in the way of conversation starters. I picked his brain about everything to do with Emma and their group of friends back in New York. Technically, I'm a part of the group too, but not really. I've always belonged among them solely as an extension of Emma and Andrew.

"Has Emma said anything about what I'm doing?" I prodded, curious.

"About your work?" he asked.

I nodded.

"No, not really. I mean, she doesn't really understand it, why you chose this over—" He saw my expression and cut himself off with a shake of his head. "It doesn't matter. She'll come around."

Will she? I worry our relationship is beyond repair. We've been in this new normal for over two years now.

"She's rooting for us, of course," he said with a timid smile. "She wants everything to go back to the way it was."

I felt the guilt then, like a boulder sitting heavy in my stomach. With barely any effort at all, I could repair things with Andrew and win back the approval of Emma. It would be so easy to set everything as it was: reconstruct the dream house, walk back inside, and shut the door behind me.

I'm not opposed to that solution either. In fact, it's what I was planning to do just as soon as I finished this job with Nate and headed back to the States. Not *right* when I returned, of course.

I've always envisioned marrying Andrew at some ambiguous point in the future, when I stopped having cold feet about him and our relationship, when I was ready to get serious and settle down. Maybe after my next birthday, or the one after that.

Andrew coming here changes everything though. He's forcing my hand. Our future is no longer a hypothetical thing; it's here now, and I have to make a decision.

It's why I'm so quiet at dinner. I have too much to think about. I've barely touched the pasta Nate made, as good as it is. The wine has gone down easy enough, though I cut myself off before I have another glass. With the way I'm feeling, I'd rather not muddle things with too much alcohol.

I feel Nate studying me, but I don't dare look at him. I've been focused on my plate mainly. I've sat in this spot for ten or fifteen minutes and I think surely that's enough. I scoot my chair back and take my plate to the sink.

"I'll do those," Nate tells me, and I don't argue.

I want to go up and take a shower. I don't want to stay in a room with both Nate and Andrew together for one more second.

I excuse myself and scurry up, but apparently, I'm not the only one looking for an escape. I'm not even completely up

the stairs before I hear the back door open.

It's Nate. He's leaving.

I want to rush down immediately, but I suppress the urge. I only allow myself to hurry to the window once I've grabbed a fresh set of clothes. I half-expect to see taillights in the distance, but his car is parked where we left it earlier. He's not going anywhere; he's getting to work. I stay pressed close to the window as I watch him set up a lamp, illuminating the spot where he likes to chop wood. Apparently now is as good a time as any to replenish the stack in the shed. Never mind that it's freezing cold and pitch black. He'd rather get frostbite than endure another minute in this cottage, and I don't even blame him.

I turn the water on in the shower and crank it until steam fills the small room. I hear Andrew in the hallway, heading into the bedroom, and it doesn't even occur to me to call out to him and have him join me in here.

When I'm done stalling—lathering, shaving, exfoliating—I step out of the shower and dress in the oversized t-shirt and socks I brought into the bathroom with me. I wrap my hair in a towel and slip into the room where Andrew sits on the bed, trying in vain to scroll on his phone.

He looks up when I walk in, his eyes a little red, like he's been crying. "Does he have a cat?"

I grimace. "Yes, sorry. He's usually in here but we moved him to Nate's room."

He nods, not annoyed per se.

"I can see if Nate has something you can take?"

"I brought some medicine. Never travel without it."

"Right. Good. Shower's free." I point back out into the hall like there's any confusion over where the shower could be in this tiny cottage.

He drops his phone onto the bed and stands, stretching his arms over his head while he takes me in. Then he unfurls a sheepish smile.

“You’re so beautiful.”

I scrunch my nose. “In my t-shirt?”

“Or *out* of it,” he says, his cheeks turning a little pink.

Panic grips me so suddenly. No thought. No indecision. Pure impulse.

Andrew and I can’t have sex.

We can’t.

“Aren’t we on a break?” I ask, my voice trembling.

He offers me a crooked smile. “Are we?”

I’m not ready for this conversation. Not yet.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to...complicate things that way. I mean, not until we decide what we’re going to do.”

He tries to conceal his hurt, but I still see it for a fleeting second.

I hate having to turn him down, but there’s no other option. I don’t want to be intimate with him, and realizing that scares me—that clear, powerful thought: I don’t want to have sex with Andrew. And truthfully, it’s not just about making our situation more complicated. If I were dying to touch him, to have him in that way, it wouldn’t matter what obstacles stood between us. Right?

“I get it, yeah,” Andrew says. “Should we talk about us then?”

We haven’t yet. He flew all the way here and we’ve been together for hours and there have been no dramatic declarations of love. I’m still not sure exactly what I want to say, or more specifically, I haven’t worked up the courage to say what I need to, so I look down and shake my head.

“In the morning.”

Andrew rarely raises his voice. He’s agreeable and kind. I think maybe if he pressed the issue, I would be honest with him right now, but he nods, more than willing to accommodate me. Never mind that he flew halfway around the world to get

to me. Never mind that he took a car to the middle of nowhere and has put up with Nate's awful attitude all evening. Never mind that I can't even look him in the eye for more than a few seconds at a time.

I want to shelve the status of our relationship until the morning and that's that. He doesn't push me on it.

It's a huge relief. I'm hoping by morning, I'll feel differently. The shock of his arrival will have worn off and I'll feel more solid in our relationship. It's probably always a little strange to reunite with someone you haven't seen in a long time, like starting back at ground zero in a way.

Hours later, it's the middle of the night, and I'm standing at the kitchen counter in my oversized t-shirt and fuzzy socks. I have a warm cup of tea clutched between my hands and I'm staring out at the sprinkling of snow gently falling to the ground. I can't see much of it. There's only a small lamp on in the kitchen, not enough to light the whole backyard, but I love how tender it feels to be awake with the snow.

I wasn't able to fall asleep, but Andrew's been dead to the world for hours. He's always been good like that. The moment his head touches the pillow, he's out like a light.

I thought sleeping in the small bed together would make it difficult for him, but no. He wrapped himself around me, using me like a child uses a teddy bear, and then I tried to go to sleep as well, but I couldn't. I held myself absolutely motionless, barely breathing, trying not to disturb him. Eventually, when I couldn't lie awake listening to Andrew sleeping for one more second, I slipped out of bed and padded quietly downstairs.

I'm feeling twisted up inside. Angry and guilty and resentful.

Andrew and I probably should have had sex tonight. If we were going to repair things, that would have been a good place to start. I know he assumed it would happen. He came all the way here to prove his love for me, to win me back.

When we lay down together in bed, he reached over to draw me closer.

“I love you,” he said, and it brought me back to the first time he said it to me in that loud whisper in front of my family. I felt the exact same pressure on my chest, only this time, I didn’t say it back. I leaned over and kissed his cheek then pretended to fall asleep.

A part of me wishes I’d just said it as a way to force the future and tip the scales in that direction. Better yet, if I’d said I love you *and* we’d had sex, it would be clear to us both that we were officially back together. Everything would be out of my hands. No more crippling indecision.

According to my family, I would have done the perfect thing. Fast-forward to Connecticut summers, a three-car garage, a boat, a brownstone. Smart little children running off to private school and my husband, the successful investment banker, making me feel loved and cherished for as long as I live.

What more could a person want?

The snow is picking up a bit now. The flurries are so light the wind swirls them around and around. I feel like a little figurine standing inside a snow globe: a girl with her face in the window, a steaming cup of tea partially blurring her features.

I don’t think I’ll ever get around to actually drinking it. It’s not very good and I already added generous amounts of honey and sugar to it. At this point, it’s more dessert than drink, and yet somehow it *still* tastes bitter.

Suddenly, I feel Cat. I look down to see him twine himself between my legs, rubbing his face against my calf. He loops back through to do it again, and I smile at him.

“Where have you been, you minx?” I ask him, though I already know. We put him in Nate’s room earlier. But if he’s out here, that means—

Nate steps off the last stair and freezes when he sees me standing near the kitchen window, peering at him over my

shoulder. The sight of him steals my breath. He's shirtless, wearing navy sleeping pants that sit low on his tapered waist. It's not the pants that draw my attention, obviously, but I look at them because I can't keep staring at his chest. There's a dominance about him that's impossible to ignore, a quiet strength. Nate has interrupted my moment of solitude, and it only takes milliseconds for my heart rate to respond, racing to catch up to this new development.

I catch a glimpse of the veins running up his biceps, and then I berate myself for looking again.

"Aren't you cold?" I tease.

His gaze drops pointedly to my bare legs. "I could ask you the same thing."

"I have socks on," I say by way of lame excuse. "You're barefoot."

He shrugs one beautifully sculpted shoulder and finally pads into the kitchen. "I was just coming down for some tea. I didn't think about a shirt."

"Here, have mine."

"Your shirt?"

I narrow my eyes, but his mischievous smile wins me over before I can show any real annoyance.

"My *tea*."

I hold it out for him and he comes over for it, stopping close enough that our legs bump together as he settles himself against the counter. He takes the mug from me and drinks a long sip. Then *he* pulls a face. "Yeesh, that's sweet."

"You're welcome. Don't ask me my secret recipe." I lean in and lower my voice to barely above a whisper. "*Sugar*."

He smiles and takes another sip. Apparently, he doesn't really mind the taste.

"Why are you awake so late?" he asks with a disapproving tone.

I glance over to the side wall. “The clock over there says it’s a little past 2:00 a.m., so technically, you should be asking why I’m up so early...” He doesn’t like this response, so I roll my eyes. “Couldn’t sleep.”

He nods. “That bed probably isn’t big enough for two people.”

I shrug and reach out to tilt the tea mug my way again, just to taste it one more time. Nate doesn’t mind. He helps me take a sip and now we’re sharing from the same mug.

I shake my head. “Still gross.”

“Andrew didn’t seem to have a problem with the bed?” Nate asks, his gaze on the tea.

“No, not last I checked. He was out cold. Have you slept?”

“Not a wink.”

His broad chest is bare from his neck down to that delicious V at his hips, and I don’t look. I keep my attention up on his face. Difficult doesn’t *begin* to cover it. I’m getting eye strain from fighting against the urge to check him out.

I cross my arms when his gaze falls to my chest for a brief moment. No bra in the middle of the night. “Is that like you? I can’t remember hearing you banging around downstairs the last few weeks, but maybe you’ve been quiet?”

“No issues outside of tonight and the first night you arrived.”

Right.

“You deserve to go without sleep after the way you acted tonight.”

Nate’s expression hardens. “I can’t be nice to him.”

I frown at his admission. “Why?”

He looks away, out toward the falling snow, and I study his profile. His jaw tightens and then he takes another sip of tea. He’s not going to give me an answer, and my mind is overloaded with a thousand possibilities.

I want to know. I crave Nate's thoughts like they hold the key to my happiness. *Tell me everything you're feeling and then maybe this will be okay. Maybe I'm not so alone here...*

"Nate," I whisper.

He looks at me out of the corner of his eyes, angry somehow.

But that's not it, not really. All that anger is just a facade.

I reach out to touch his arm. I mean for it to be gentle, but then I have ahold of his bicep like he's a lifeline I need for survival.

He looks down at where I touch him and then he asks point-blank, "Did he kiss you?"

I swallow and nod. "Once. When he first got here. I... He surprised me."

"And now? Upstairs?"

"No."

His blue eyes snap up to mine. "How is that possible?"

I let go of him and he turns then, slowly pressing closer, caging me in against the side of the kitchen counter. I have enough time to scoot away—*I could*—but I stay put, letting him press in around me from all sides. He drops the teacup beside me, intentionally brushing his thumb across my hip.

He steps between my legs, pressing our lower halves together.

I shiver and tip my chin up so I can look at him. Already, I'm trembling.

He looks bewitched as he lifts his hand to trace my cheek, studying me with patience that seems to be killing him. "How could he resist?"

The writing is on the wall. Everything that could happen between us seems to be unfurling quickly, out of my control.

I panic.

“Don’t kiss me,” I plead quickly. “Not while he’s here. Please.”

But Nate doesn’t listen. He leans forward and captures my mouth, effectively taking a sledgehammer to my fragile heart. Nothing exists beyond us. There’s only his gentle lips. His claiming hands. His hips pinning me in place. I kiss him back with hunger, inhaling his heady scent and taste. I touch his shoulders—his hot skin—and I melt against him until we’re completely flush.

Already our bodies recognize this for what it is. Our hips meet and I shamelessly rub myself against him. His hand slips between our bodies, up beneath my t-shirt. The heat of his palm feels like it’s branding me. He trails his fingers along my hip and the side of my stomach. Then his hand slides up over my ribs, and he cups my heavy breast with a deep moan. I feel it like he’s already inside me. He is, really. Nate has etched himself on the delicate underbelly of my soul in a way no man has before, and it *enrages* me how easy it has been for him, how little it takes. A midnight kiss and suddenly, I’m his forever.

I push him away with all the strength I have. He doesn’t look surprised, just guilty.

Join the club.

His lips are red, his hair disheveled. The only sound in the kitchen is our labored breathing, sharp inhales and exhales.

“I told you not to kiss me!”

“Bullshit,” he snaps.

My fingers turn into angry little fists. If I could, I would scrape my nails down his chest, push and shove him, unleash this rage and worry and guilt.

I can’t touch him though. I could never hurt him in that way.

“You don’t understand what I’m giving up,” I say, my voice weak now. “What I would be walking away from...”

I see the change come over him slowly. The tears swimming in my eyes scare him, I know it. He steps back and shakes his head. He puts that careful distance between us, wounding me unintentionally. “Don’t give it up then.”

Like it’s that simple.

“Are you kidding me?”

“Be with Andrew,” he insists.

“Fuck you, Nate.”

Before Nate, I’ve never said those words out loud to another person before. I’ve never been in a relationship where we would ever use language like that. It’s laughable to think Andrew would ever elicit this reaction from me, but Nate draws every single emotion to the surface. With him, I’m a live wire.

He doesn’t take the words to heart though. He doesn’t explode. He watches the tears slip down my cheeks and he wears his empathy like a badge of honor, his eyebrows tugging together, his mouth turned down in a frown.

“Why can’t you be with him? If it’s what you want?”

Isn’t it obvious?

“Because I met you.”

CHAPTER 23

SUMMER

ANDREW TOUCHES my shoulder and I jolt awake on the couch. Cat is huddled behind my legs. A fleece blanket is tugged up just beneath my chin; it was cold down here last night without the fire. I needed another blanket and a decent pillow, but I didn't want to go back upstairs after what happened with Nate in the kitchen. I relegated myself to the couch for the few hours of sleep I could manage, and now Andrew stares down at me with a look I haven't seen in months, not since our breakup.

He understands intuitively what's happened, maybe not the details between Nate and me, but at least the dissolution of our relationship, for good this time.

"Sorry to wake you."

I shake my head as I sit up quickly. "No. It's totally okay." I whip off my blanket and immediately regret it once I feel how cold the cottage is. "Here, let me get us some coffee."

I'm about to stand, but Andrew shakes his head. I notice then that he's already dressed. His suitcase sits behind him near the front door.

"I don't have long. A car is coming for me. I'll grab coffee at the airport."

My sleep-addled brain has a hard time keeping up. "How did you get a car?"

Last I checked there was no cell service or internet out here. It would have been impossible for him to schedule

something.

“I set it up with the guy who drove me yesterday. Sort of as a contingency plan.” He looks away. “Just...I didn’t want to be stranded out here without a car.”

His confession is heartbreaking.

“You’re leaving?”

He nods once, and I don’t have it in me to pretend anymore. I won’t try to convince him to stay.

“How long until your car gets here?” I ask, wiping the sleep from my eyes as I stand up off the couch.

“Ten minutes.”

I freeze. *So soon?*

“Hold on, I’m going to change, okay? I’ll go with you. Let me just—”

I’m already taking the stairs two at a time, rushing into my room. I grab jeans and a sweater—the one with the least cat hair. My teeth are brushed in seconds. My hair isn’t brushed at all. I wrap it up in a clip just as I hear a car pull up outside. *No.*

I’m coming down the stairs fast. I won’t give Andrew the option to leave without me. He’s going back to Leeds today, and I’m not going to let him go alone.

He’s outside already, the driver loading his suitcase into the trunk of the car that delivered him here yesterday afternoon.

“Thank you,” he says before he looks up and sees me running across the snow.

“I’m coming with you.”

Andrew frowns. “You don’t need to. It’s a long way.”

“I’m coming.”

I turn to the driver. “Could you bring me back here after you drop him?”

Whatever the fare is, I’ll pay it. It’s worth it.

The driver agrees and I turn to Andrew. His mouth flattens into a line, and he doesn't say anything before he gets into the back seat of the car, leaving the door open for me to join. It's all the invitation I'm going to get.

We both understand that there is no false hope here. I'm not going with Andrew because I've slept off my indecision and come to my senses. I'm here because I want to hold his hand in the end, to comfort him the same way he would comfort me.

In the car, we sit on opposite sides, no one talking as the driver pulls back out onto the road. The cottage disappears behind us and I reach across the back seat and take Andrew's hand in mine. This is the last time we'll touch in this way. I know it and he knows it and when our eyes meet, I try so hard not to look sad.

We're not two hearts breaking. I broke Andrew's heart a long time ago, and he never had the power to break mine. This grief is complex and painful, but it has nothing to do with love. I feel sorry for having wasted Andrew's time and for stringing him along, but the intention and hope was that us being together would always pay off in the end. Understanding Andrew isn't the man I want to be with isn't easy. I know that no matter how much I want to love him, I can't talk myself into it. I will never make Emma happy in this way.

I squeeze his hand as he studies me.

"I'm sorry you came here."

It hurts me to think about him going out on a limb like this, flying all that way only to be sitting in this car now. If I thought he'd accept it, I'd offer to cover the cost of his ticket.

He shakes his head. "I'm not."

His tone is somber but solid. He really doesn't regret it then. He's an intelligent guy. I wonder how much he's always understood about my feelings, whether it's even worth mentioning the truth.

"I've been stubborn with you," he admits with a ghost of a smile on his lips. "Hoping things would change."

“I hoped too.”

“It was delusional to think you’d come around. I’ve been asking you to move in with me for a year. You haven’t said you love me in six months.”

I frown. “Has it been that long?”

We’ve only been on a break for half that time.

I wince. “I’m sorry.”

I could say it a thousand times and it still wouldn’t be enough. Andrew is such a good man and he’s capable of so much love.

“Emma will take it the hardest,” Andrew quips, trying to make light of the situation as he lets go of my hand and turns to face me.

Little does he know that’s the real wound exposed by our breakup. This will only further exacerbate my strained relationship with my sister.

“Should we talk about things? Rehash it?”

I want to give him every opportunity for the truth. If he wants it, I’ll be brutally honest in any way that he wants.

Andrew shrugs. “Sounds exhausting.”

I smile.

“I’ll box up your things at my place and pass them to Emma.”

“Thanks, yeah. I’ll do the same when I get back to the States.”

His brows gently furrow. “When do you think that will be?”

His gaze suddenly feels intrusive.

I blush. “Oh. Well, I guess it just depends on this project.”

“And *Nate*.”

He tosses out Nathaniel’s nickname so casually. I didn’t realize I’d been using it with him. I give Andrew a curious

look.

“And Nate, yes. We’ve hit a stride with plotting his third book.”

Andrew smiles knowingly. “It’s not about the book. He has feelings for you.”

I swallow, careful to keep my expression neutral. There’s no reason to hurt Andrew with details of my relationship with Nate.

But Andrew sees straight through me.

“It’s obvious, you know. The guy wouldn’t even look at me. I’m surprised he didn’t poison my dinner last night.”

A laugh spills out of me. “*Andrew.*”

“I’m serious.”

He watches me process this, and though at first, I think about denying the whole thing, it seems more fair to Andrew to just let it be. If the situation were reversed, I wouldn’t want to be fed a bumbling lie.

Andrew and I spend the remainder of our drive to Leeds tying off the loose ends of our relationship. It’s already so neatly packaged. A breakup parsed out over months is hardly a breakup at all. When we’re near the airport, I do try to apologize again about the fact that we didn’t work, but I get the impression it only hurts Andrew to hear it. No one wants to feel pitied for the way they feel.

The driver pulls up in front of the check-in for international departures, and I step out and wait for Andrew to get his luggage before giving him a hug. Neither one of us cries when I step away. I offer a small smile and tell him I’ll see him soon because in all likelihood, I will. Emma will throw a dinner party in the city and Andrew will be there with a new girl. I’ll vet her not out of jealousy, but out of fierce protectiveness. Andrew deserves only the best.

I wave at him as he rolls his suitcase through the sliding glass doors and then I look to the driver.

“Ready to head back?” he asks.

And all at once, it hits me. *This* is the feeling. *This* is what I should have felt when Andrew surprised me on the phone yesterday. I tremble in the back seat as we pull away from the airport and head back toward Nate's cottage. There's a wave of nausea followed by a rush of panic.

I think of the kiss I shared with Nate in the kitchen last night, my sharp words after he told me to "be with Andrew" like he was perfectly fine with the idea.

I have a lot of time to consider how Nate will react when I get back. In fact, I replay the various options over and over in my head the entire drive up from the Leeds airport. There's a frenzy of emotions battling inside me: trepidation, excitement, worry. Butterflies dance in my stomach one second and then anxiety douses them the next.

I barely know what to think or feel when the cottage finally cuts into view, nestled among the snowy hills. Nate's out repairing the fence when the driver pulls up near the shed, and he doesn't stop when I get out of the car. He's still at it as the driver pulls away, as the sound of the tires grows faint and eventually fades out altogether.

I've dealt with this Nate before—the quiet man who'd rather bury his feelings than admit to them. I could go inside and give him space, but that won't solve my problem. If anything, it'd make him double down.

"Not even going to look at me?" I call out, *plenty* loud enough for him to hear me.

He sets another heavy rock down without acknowledging me. A fury builds inside me. Before I know it, I'm leaning down to scoop up snow, forming it in my hands. The first snowball I aim at him is loose and ineffective, smacking his leg. It barely gets his attention. So I do it again, really going for it with the second one, shaping the snow into a compact ball before taking aim straight for his head. I miss the mark and the snowball hits his right shoulder, but he turns around, annoyed all the same.

Of course the first thing he notices is my clothes. I'm standing out here with no jacket, no mittens, no hat. I left the

house in such a hurry this morning, and it's not like I needed a coat to sit in the back of a car.

“Go inside, Summer.”

I cross my arms, feeling petulant. His shrug says, *Suit yourself*. Then he turns back around and resumes his work. He picks up another rock just as my next snowball hits him in the butt.

He goes stock-still for two seconds, and then he gets back to work.

My next one hits his back. The one after that finally hits his head, and some of it spills down into the back of his jacket.

“Oops,” I say, my tone taunting.

It's the last straw. Nate turns and starts toward me with a dangerous look in his eyes. I swallow my panic and let the last snowball slip out of my hand. It won't do me any good now, not while he hunts me down. As he approaches, he doesn't speed up, but still somehow his momentum builds like a tsunami.

I don't know what he's going to do. He'd have every right to pick me up and dump me in the snow. When he reaches me, I hold my breath, expecting the worst, but he doesn't retaliate. He wraps one hand around my neck and fiercely pulls me to him. I only have a moment to realize what's about to happen before he bends down and kisses me with aching passion. I can taste the relief, this feeling of euphoria passing between us. I lift my frozen fingers to cup his cheeks and he hisses from the cold.

“You should be inside.”

I smile against his lips. “Then take me there like you did last time.”

I kiss his cheek and then I kiss his mouth, anxious and frenzied. I want Nate shamelessly. There's no room for doubt or second-guessing. It feels so good to throw myself at him and have him lift me off the ground, holding me with a biting strength. My legs go up around his waist, and as he walks us inside the cottage, I kiss him—his jaw, his neck, his temple.

He pushes the door open and kicks it closed and I hear the hinges rattle with annoyance. But Nate's already peeling my shirt off my body, taking me over to the couch, sitting down while I straddle his lap.

Everything is ice. We should light the fire, but then we'd have to get up and I will not let him leave me, not now. We should have done this weeks ago. We should have been on each other every second since the first moment we kissed. I've wanted that, and now, because we've waited so long, I'm starved. I feel like I'll never be sated, not if we kiss here all night, not if we stay here forever.

His hands unclasp my bra and then I'm naked from the waist up, letting him drop his mouth to my breasts, tasting and sucking. He teases me more than I can bear, retribution for the snowballs, no doubt.

"You're killing me," I groan with anger.

He pulls back to look at me, his hair mussed from my hands, his lips cherry red and sexy. His smirk is almost too much, too cocky and arrogant. "Am I?"

"If I had a snowball, I'd dump it right on your head."

He reaches up to cup my breasts, toying with them while he watches me. "You pissed me off this morning."

"You piss me off every morning."

His blue eyes darken and he leans in to kiss me, keeping his hands on me always, like he can't get enough. I know he loves my curves. He doesn't have to tell me my body drives him wild; I can feel him beneath me, hard as a rock.

He pulls back only enough that our foreheads are still touching. He keeps us here in this vulnerable space and I ask the tough question, the one I've wondered about all morning. "Did you think I left?"

It's a moment before he answers. I wonder if he's weighing his options, trying to decide just how brutally honest he should be with me. "I wasn't sure. I checked your room and I didn't think you'd leave all of your stuff, but..."

There was always the possibility.

I see the worry etched on his face, the fear he carried all morning. I could have so easily left my things here and gone back to the States with Andrew on a whim. In another life, I would have.

I reach up to trace a finger along the edge of his face, feeling the tension start to melt away from his temple and brows. I skim the sharp ridge of his cheekbone and I'm planning to continue this lazy perusal, but as I reach the edge of his scruff, he moves as swift as a snake and takes my finger into his mouth. His teeth clamp down.

"Ouch!" I yelp as I pull my finger out and shake it, mostly for show. The bite didn't hurt.

He laughs and leans in, kissing me again.

I push him away, continuing our playful struggle, trying to get back at him for ruining my fun. But he doesn't let me back off. He kisses me with renewed hunger. It's possessive and hot.

He's all-consuming in a way I'm not used to. I can feel myself slipping away so easily, inhibitions dropping one by one like dominoes. Have I ever sat shamelessly on top of a man undressed down to the waist, letting him look and touch me in this slow, agonizing way?

I want to cover up, and at the same time, I want to undress completely, expose myself and reclaim that power. There is nothing as sexy as a naked body, and I want to see Nate's. I take off his jacket and shirt.

Finally, we're on an even playing field again. Nate's skin is warm and smooth. I take his bicep in my hand and marvel at my inability to get a decent grip. I've never thought I was interested in muscular men, but Nate has thoroughly disproved that theory.

I notice him watching me. We're playing the same game—ogling each other and trying to be coy about it. I want to ask him what he's planning to do with me, how much longer he'll touch me without *touching* me.

I hate how serious he looks. I worry what's in his head. Any other man with a half-naked woman on his lap would have stars in his eyes, but not Nate. His gaze swims with thoughts that would pierce my heart if I knew them. I get the impression he's holding some of himself back, even now. It scares me how much power he has over me; the potential for unrequited love isn't just a distant worry but a likely end. It would be fitting karmic retribution for what I just put Andrew through, I guess.

"We should stop now," he says, suddenly somber enough to pull his hands off me.

"No."

My tone is harsh and unyielding.

His gaze turns mean. "This can't happen the way you want it to."

"You don't know what I want. Whatever it is you're worried about, can't it wait until tomorrow?"

He looks away, toward the kitchen. His jaw is set. He's struggling and I don't know what's going on, but I can't make sense of how this can be wrong.

I lean in and press a gentle kiss just below his ear. "Could I have you just once?" I whisper before taking the tip of his earlobe between my teeth. My hand is pressed to his chest and I feel how hard his heart is thumping. "*Please*. You won't hurt me," I promise, though even as I say it, it tastes like a lie.

Truly though, I can't imagine a scenario where I regret having sex with Nate. He doesn't understand how long I've lived without this desire. It has the potential to be heartbreaking, but it could also be so beautiful and I want to feel all of it, no matter the consequences.

He brought me in here. He undressed me and kissed me and he's fucked with my head enough that the least he can do is finish the job.

I'm already moving, unzipping my jeans and pushing off him enough to pull them down my legs. I leave my panties on and then I work on his pants. The undressing is the easy part.

Nate lets me do it, and when I get stuck or need help, he comes to my aid. It's like he won't initiate it, but he won't stop it either. There must be a battle raging in his head and I wish I could help him, but I also understand that Nate isn't going to let me do that. Not now, at least. Though deep down, I know this isn't quite the real thing, know there is regret shadowing every single touch, I can't stop myself from continuing.

"Do you want me?" I ask, barely believing I manage the vulnerable question.

His expression is murderous, like he's enraged I could ever believe otherwise. Then he kisses me again, pulling me until I fall against him, until there's no way for us to get any closer. I reach down and take him in my hand, stroking him a few times until I align us. I ask if we need protection, if we should worry about a condom. I'm on birth control—it's not that. He shakes his head. We're fine. It's been so long for the both of us.

A shudder zips through me when I feel his length brush against the sensitive skin between my legs. I'm nervous as I press down onto him achingly slow. There is no rush, no rush, no...

He takes my hips in hand and releases a deep groan before he tugs me down, pressing into me to the hilt. The stretch is agony until it's not. I feel him in ways I can't ever take back, in ways that are hard to imagine.

Oh.

I didn't realize.

I didn't realize it could be *this*.

Our eyes lock. My lips open. I'm going to tell him something, words that feel impossible—words I can't mean.

I swallow them down, hide them in the pit of my stomach, and lean forward to kiss him instead. Focusing only on the taste of his mouth, his teeth scraping my lips, taking ahold of the bottom one, *biting*. We're burning right on the edge of something. The sheer pleasure of our intimacy promises equal amounts of hurt.

Oh I hate this. *I hate this*, but it's too good. The way he keeps ahold of my hips and starts to move me. He knows just what to do, lifting me up until I'm left empty and bereft and then slowly pressing back into me until it feels like our souls are touching. His hands squeeze tighter as I roll my hips, rocking into the quickening sensation. It's so much better with him inside me. I never want it to end.

The first tear that slips out I swipe away so fast he doesn't see it, but the second he tastes on his lips.

"Summer."

I shake my head and look away, whispering, *"Sorry."*

I'm apologizing for my reaction. I hate that I've gone so long in life and never felt this. I feel silly somehow. How many times has he been in this position with a woman, completely rocking her world? To him, it's an average Saturday. I'm the novice, the one in tears.

I don't want him to see me anymore, and so I fall against him, press my face into his neck, and inhale his scent as he quickens his pace, pumping his hips so that when his hand slips between my legs, when he touches me there, it's almost too much.

Almost.

I gasp, and it's like the pleasure is ripped out of me so quickly I can barely contain it. It's so different to come apart while he's buried inside me—exquisite. I clench around him and feed off his moans. For those brief seconds, we're the closest two people can be, and maybe Nate realizes I'm not ready to separate yet because he shifts us, laying me down flat on the couch so he can move up and over me. The muscles in his shoulders bunch as he repositions me, and then he holds himself up enough that he can look down at me.

I know I look shattered. I try to turn away toward the couch cushion so I'll be more in shadow, but his hand captures my jaw, and slowly, he turns my face so he can look at me.

He's asking without words if I'm okay, and there's no simple answer for that. After this, I'll probably never be okay

again. So if it's already too late, if I've already opened Pandora's box, why stop now? Why not tug him down and kiss him like I already love him? Why not let him slide into me again, deeper now with the new angle?

A curse rings from my lips—a pulse of pleasure—and I almost catch a hint of a smile from him. Even though there are conflicting emotions at play, I know he's here, wanting this as much as I do.

I love the feel of his hips pinning me down, holding me at his mercy. What starts out slow and tantalizing builds steadily. He peels up and off me, sitting up so he has room to touch me between my thighs. Every bit of me is on display, *his*. His blue eyes are glazed with desire as he watches what he does to me. With every thrust, his speed picks up and the tension builds.

My hand reaches out to clasp his wrist. It's like I'm panicked by the threat of my orgasm building so quickly. And yet, I'm chasing after it with everything I have, but Nate doesn't let me hold him back. He rubs his thumb across me until I pinch my eyes closed, arch up off the couch, and release a soundless gasp. I feel it *everywhere*.

Eventually, reluctantly, I blink my eyes open. Nate comes into focus, looking so confident posed over me with his haughty expression and hidden secrets. His brow furrows as our eyes meet and hold steady, as he maintains a maddening pace, pumping in and out of me. I love getting to watch him now that I'm sated and more clearheaded. I love seeing him lose the last tethers of control. His eyes darken. His breaths hitch. His lips part and he pitches forward with a fierce groan. He falls across me with so much weight it's like he's burying me. My arms go around his neck and I hold him down, keeping my eyes closed as a way to stave off everything that's about to come. Our scent surrounds us, his citrus soap and my shampoo.

It's in this haze that I realize I gave him something I can't take back, not even if I ask for it, not even if he were willing to give it to me. It feels like a broken promise, a secret I'll have to take to my grave.

It's so long before he moves, but then there's an obvious change that comes over him as he sits up and separates himself from me.

“Go and shower,” he tells me. “Then we can talk.”

Already, he can't look me in the eyes.

CHAPTER 24

NATE

WHEN I COME DOWNSTAIRS after my shower, I find Summer pacing in the kitchen in her cherry red pajamas, her damp hair curling as it dries. Her cheeks are flushed and her lips are still swollen. In her hand, there's a glass of—I narrow my eyes to inspect it closer—*scotch*.

So she found my liquor while I was showering. I hope that's her first glass. I wasn't up there that long and if she's about to down her second, nothing good will come from the conversation we're about to have.

She freezes when she hears me coming; the creak of the final stair gave me away, and now her green eyes meet mine and I'm shocked to see she's not upset. I wiped her tears away before, on the couch, but now she has showered and looks fresh and beautiful.

I walk into the kitchen because I can't walk into the living room. I can't even look at my couch. I might have to dump it outside when she leaves. It'll never not remind me of what we just did together.

"I think I have it figured out," she tells me as I walk over to get a glass of water. "Your big bad secret. Why you're holding me at arm's length..."

I arch a brow, curious to hear how close she might be to the truth. I'm not exactly an open book, but Summer is smart and gossip might have spread around InkWell more than I realized.

“You’ve killed someone.”

I bark out a laugh as I reach for two cups, one for me and one for her. “*What?*”

“Yeah, you’re a cold-blooded killer. *That’s* your secret. You bury the bodies out behind the shed.”

She points outside for emphasis.

“How much of that have you had?” I ask, nodding toward her glass. Suddenly, the water can wait. I want what she’s having.

“Not enough, I assure you. I don’t actually like it all that much, but I thought I might need something stronger than wine.”

“Are you already regretting it then?”

Her cheeks go rosy. “What we just did?” She clears her throat and her gaze slips over my shoulder. She looks at the couch for only a second before she quickly looks down. Her hair falls like a curtain in front of her face. “No. I don’t regret it. Do you?”

She looks vulnerable standing there in her t-shirt and leggings. Childlike and fragile.

Guilt looms over me as I reply, “I’m not sure.”

Her head whips back up, her eyes filled with fire now. “*Seriously?! You’re supposed to lie and tell me you loved it.*”

I grunt. “It’s not about whether or not I liked it.”

“So you did...”

She’s fishing for compliments, but I won’t give her any. It wouldn’t help. “It wasn’t the performance,” I assure her, skipping over flowery words. “It’s about hurting your feelings.”

Her mouth flattens into a frown. “Because you’re worried about me finding out about the murder stuff?”

“I’m not a murderer.” I laugh, going over to pour two fingers of scotch into my glass.

“No? Well, should I try another guess?”

“I wish you wouldn’t.”

Once I have my drink in hand, I turn around and lean against the counter. All the while she ignores me, carrying on with her wild theories.

“You’re leading a double life. You’re married. You have a wife and children back in the States. They don’t know you’re here.”

I laugh. “How would that even work?”

“They think you’re in prison.”

“They what—”

“For the killing. Because actually you’re a murderer.”

Her smile is infectious.

“Would you knock it off?”

“What? I just don’t know what could be so bad. You’re doing this whole cloak-and-dagger thing, like ooohhh everything is so mysterious and—” She gasps like she’s finally got it, even snapping her fingers with the aha moment. “You’re a vampire. *No*—a werewolf. That’s why you leave sometimes at night. I didn’t even *think* to check if there’s been a full moon lately.”

I walk over to the kitchen table, grab her usual chair, and tug it out for her. “Sit down.”

“Am I close?”

“Sit down, Summer.”

It won’t work forever. This lightheartedness will only carry her so far, and then she’ll have to sit and listen and determine if she’s willing to hear me out.

With a pout, she takes her seat and watches me curve around the table and take mine. It’s quiet now. She’s not going to continue on. She must see my expression and know it’d be better to just let me get on with it.

“I told you once about my old editor, Elaine.”

“Yes, we’ve talked about her,” she says with a cavalier wave of her hand. “You think she was the only reason you were able to publish *Echo of Hope* and I think that’s complete bull—”

“Enough.”

I can’t stand how silly she’s making this.

“I was in love with Elaine. *We* were in love.”

The words wash over Summer in slow motion. There’s the look I’ve been expecting, the tensing of her jaw, the narrowing of her eyes, all the light—*gone*.

I have no choice but to continue now. “Elaine is the reason InkWell published *The Last Exodus*. She believed in the book right from the beginning. She and I were friends at first. We worked together on developmental edits for the first book, and through that, we grew closer. She held my hand during the whirlwind of press that happened after the book was released. That year was amazing, but tough. I thought being a writer meant I would be at home, by myself in front of my computer.” I sigh. “There was a lot of publicity. The book tour stopped in twenty cities, I was on every morning show you can think of—radio, podcasts, you name it.”

“Why?” she asks. “InkWell wouldn’t have demanded that of you.”

She’s right. Authors always have the final say on what they’re comfortable doing, publicity-wise.

I take a sip of my drink and shrug. “I was young and I wanted to be a team player. Elaine pushed me out of my comfort zone as well. By then, *The Last Exodus* was her baby as much as it was mine, and she wanted it to be a success.”

These words make Summer scowl. “It was never hers. *You* wrote it.”

I nod, conceding here. It’s not worth arguing over the minute details of the past.

“After that whirlwind year, it was hard for me to sit down and write *Echo of Hope*. I’ve told you how I struggle. You’ve

seen it firsthand.” I focus down on the amber color of the scotch, finding it easier to talk if I don’t have to look at her. “I lucked out though because I had already started to write *Echo of Hope* before *The Last Exodus* released, before it hit the *New York Times* bestseller list and became...what it became. There were no expectations yet, so Elaine and I took what I had started and shaped it together.”

“Did she co-write it?”

Summer asks this with the same level of betrayal someone might ask a cheating partner when seeking details of an affair. *Did you sleep with her? How many times?*

“No. I’ve never had anyone co-write with me, but she gave me developmental edits. She encouraged me on days when it was hard to escape the pressure looming on all sides.”

“So Elaine did what I’m doing,” Summer says with a terse expression.

I mostly succeed in hiding my wince. “It was different.”

Her green eyes spark with annoyance. “In what way? You two slept together on a *bed* instead of a couch?”

I squeeze my eyes closed and sigh. *That* I deserved. That and so much more.

“I’m sorry,” she says, and when I blink my eyes open, I see her anger has been replaced by remorse. “Just...forget I said that. Go on.”

I down the rest of my drink like it’s a shot and welcome the burn. It’s deserved, after all. Suddenly, I want to be done with this conversation, done with explaining myself.

“I was with Elaine for two years. She meant a lot to me.”

“And?” Summer prods, no sympathy in her voice.

She leans back in her chair, her arms crossed aggressively. She’s behind a plate of steel now, armored against me.

I furrow my brows and tilt my chin up as I try to sift through the memories. “Let’s see...did I find her in bed with

Lucas first? Or was that *after* she told me she was going to work for Black House?” My words are acerbic and mean.

“Lucas who?” Her eyes widen. “Not Lucas Sheridan?”

Of course Summer knows of him. Lucas is a well-established author with Black House Publishing, a big fish in a big pond. Though we don’t write in the same genre, our paths have crossed frequently enough for me to know I can’t stand the guy. He’s pompous and arrogant, a creative writing professor at NYU who thinks he’s God’s gift to mankind.

“Him,” I say in sharp confirmation.

I reach across the table, already grabbing for her drink before I ask if she’s going to finish it. She nods, giving me permission before I down it like I did my own.

Summer stays quiet. Maybe she’s at a loss for words or maybe she’s just trying to give me the space to get this all out. I’ve never repeated the story before. When it was happening, people just *knew*. Everyone at InkWell, everyone at Patrick’s agency. There were a lot of condolences, a lot of pitying stares, a lot of averted gazes. It felt like my name was on everyone’s lips.

I press the back of my hand to my mouth before I set Summer’s glass back down on the table and focus my attention there. “Elaine waited to get sloppy with her affair until after the publication of *Echo of Hope*. Couldn’t have the demise of our relationship fucking with my head before we’d finished book two. After all, her professional reputation was on the line as well.”

“I’m surprised she didn’t stick it out until the end then,” Summer says. “Until book three came out...”

The same thought had occurred to me. “I know she would have liked to see the series through to completion, but Lucas was tired of sneaking around and Elaine wanted to be with him. She was done waiting. She left InkWell and me and in one fell swoop, I lost the woman I loved and my professional crutch on the same day.”

The silence is unbearable, and I look up to see Summer swipe a tear from her cheek. It's astounding to me that she has any capacity for tears right now. It confirms she's the person I already know her to be: compassionate and kind. She's fierce too, but above all, she's a good person. I doubt she could stomach half of what Elaine did during the end of our relationship.

"Anyway, Elaine works with Lucas now and she's more successful than ever. Last I heard they're living together and planning their wedding. But who knows. It's been a while... They could already be married."

Summer scowls. "That's not fair. She doesn't get to be happy! She's supposed to get her just deserts. Lucas needs to break her heart or something and then she'll come crawling back and you'll say, *Nuh-uh-uh, not so fast.*"

I give the idea a moment to take root, but there's no deep font of revenge to draw from anymore. "Don't get me wrong, in the beginning, I would have loved that, but now enough time has passed that I'd almost be disappointed, I guess, if things didn't work out for them."

Summer feigns a gag. "Truly?"

"Truly."

"So you don't want me to sabotage their relationship?" Her eyes narrow. "You know I could dress up real sleazy, try to seduce Lucas and all that."

The idea of Lucas even looking at Summer makes my blood boil.

I hold up my hand. "No espionage necessary."

She sighs like I'm ruining all the fun. Then her expression sobers as she studies me. "Y'know, I realize now that I've heard some of this story. I didn't know the key players, of course. Not Elaine and Lucas, and certainly not you, but now it's easy enough to put the pieces together."

I'm not surprised. "I figured someone would have told you all about it before you came here to work with me." My tone

hardens as I emphasize the next point. “I should have told you before we slept together.”

“Oh...” She sits up straighter, color flooding her cheeks as she looks anywhere but at my face. “Yes, maybe you should have. But does it really matter now?” She takes our empty glasses off the table and scoots her chair back. She’s heading to the sink to rinse them and focusing hard on the task as she continues. “*That* was probably bound to happen to any man and woman stuck in this cottage day in and day out like we’ve been. We don’t need to overanalyze it, just the same way we didn’t overanalyze that other thing.” She accidentally drops a glass and it clatters in the sink but doesn’t break. She holds it up to show me. “Sorry. But anyway, yes, it’s done, and we won’t do it again.” She continues hand-washing them. “I mean, no offense, but I’m not going to be *that* cliché. Hooking up with one developmental editor was bad enough—maybe we shouldn’t make it a habit.”

She’s wanting me to smile or laugh. She’s making our last few days together sound light as air.

It was bound to happen.

We won’t make it a habit.

No need to overanalyze it.

She doesn’t understand the significance. I’ve just explained to her everything that happened with Elaine, and in doing so, I’ve trivialized what Summer and I have. Like it’s as simple as me having a thing for my editors, like I tumble into bed with every one of them. *Ridiculous*. But it’s hard to argue against that notion without potentially opening a chasm between us. If I explain my feelings to her—if I’m honest—she’ll have no choice but to face my words. And then what? At best, she’d welcome them. At worst...she’d rebuff them, and then we’d be stuck in this cottage together, working on my book, unable to even meet each other’s eyes. Or, she’d leave. She certainly has the right to, and not only would I have lost her, but I would rob Summer of the chance to go back to the States as a success story. She’s new at InkWell, and this project could be a major stepping stone for her and her career.

She finishes up at the sink and uses a tea towel to dry the glasses. Once they're set down on the counter, she turns back to me with a neutral expression. "So? Is that it? All your deep, dark secrets? I have to say, compared to murder, that was all very tame."

She smiles, and the light above her head casts her hair into golden light. She's silhouetted like an angel, and even after reconciling that it would be better to stay quiet for the time being, the words lodged in my throat want to spring free. My lips part as our eyes lock. She recognizes my expression and I can see it scares her because her forehead wrinkles and her green eyes look away fast.

"Think I'll head up and read. It's been a long day. I'm tired, or what do the Brits say again...? *Knackered!*"

She forces a chuckle and strolls past me, and I swear her pace picks up once she's in my periphery.

"Night!" she calls as she hurries up the stairs and rushes into her room. The door gets closed with a solid *slam*. If there were a lock, she would turn it. If there were a key, she would swallow it. She's still naive enough to think the magic between us can be snuffed out if only we put it on a shelf.

She's wrong.

CHAPTER 25

SUMMER

SUNDAY MORNING, I sleep in as long as I can manage, but there's a tipping point where it no longer feels indulgent. Now I'm just Grandpa Joe, pretending I can't use my legs. Besides, it's silly. I'm hiding up here for no good reason. I can face Nate. The worst of it is behind me.

I wanted to have sex with him, and I did. I wanted to know if it would be earth-shattering, and it was. I didn't think I'd manage to survive last night, lying awake, replaying every single agonizing moment of what we did together on that couch—and look at me! *I'm alive!* If there are dark circles under my eyes, well Nate's too much of a gentleman to mention them.

With Andrew gone, Cat's reclaimed his rightful spot in my room. I give him a few good morning scratches, behind the ears and under the chin, on his head and down his back. He purrs and stretches, and now that I'm officially out of excuses, I stand up to dress for the day. The bathroom is empty, so I wash my face and brush my teeth, and by the time I head downstairs, I have a perfectly believable smile plastered on my face and at least five different talking points prepared in the event that there's an awkward lull in conversation and it's obvious both Nate and I are vividly remembering what the other person looks like naked.

The smile is a waste though. The first floor is empty. Nate isn't in the kitchen or the living room. I peer out the window, expecting to see him with his axe in hand, but the shed is

locked up and there's not a single footprint in the snow leading away from the cottage.

Everything is quiet and still. There's no sign of Nate. That's when I turn to see the stack of white paper sitting on the edge of the kitchen table. Curious, I edge closer and lean over to look at it. Even upside down, I know immediately what it says.

A Cosmic Penance Summary

My jaw nearly comes unhinged.

It can't be...

I dart around the table, pick up the first page, and start to leaf through it quickly. The stack is thicker than I first thought, at least fifteen pages of an in-depth outline. *When did he do this?!*

I look up toward his corner of the second story. Did he stay up all night? Is he up there now?

I need to know.

I leave the summary where it is and tiptoe up the stairs. Even in stealth mode, I'm not quiet enough for Cat. He saunters out of my room, meowing for more attention. I scoop him up off the ground to quiet him then I creep toward Nate's bedroom door so I can press my ear against it.

Immediately I go rigid. My eyes widen at the crisp clicks and clacks of Nate's keyboard. The staccato rhythm is exhilarating. His fingers are flying.

Oh my god.

I don't know what to do. Cat doesn't understand the implications of this. The fact that Nate and I have been working on an outline was a good sign that he might have been easing out of his long-endured writer's block, but the summary downstairs coupled with this flurry of keys means something else entirely. I don't want to jinx it, so I hurry away, back down the stairs.

I feed Cat and make myself a cup of coffee, and all the while, my gaze drifts continuously to that summary. I can

barely resist the urge to rip it off the table and speed-read it, but I'm too excited. I want to savor every word.

I'm also admittedly a little worried. There's a chance it's all horrible, that Nate's not on the other side of his writer's block but instead fumbling his way through it, putting metaphorical pen to paper by any means necessary.

I chew on my bottom lip and tap, tap, tap my finger on the counter, willing the coffee pot to hurry it up. I hastily pour a mug's worth, add a splash of cream, and then scramble to take my seat.

Cat leaps onto my lap as I swivel the packet of paper toward me with a racing heart.

This is Christmas morning.

This is Christmas morning *and* my birthday combined.

Still, I pause for a moment, unsure. I know Nate left this down here for me. I'm obviously allowed to read it, and yet as I turn the first page, it feels like I'm peering past a forbidden curtain, seeing what I shouldn't. A trickle of excitement raises goose bumps down my arms the moment I see Captain Amelia Turner's name.

Twelve astronauts hold the fate of Earth's people in their hands. As the Cosmos crew, led by Captain Amelia Turner, descends to a promising exoplanet (Kepler-452b), they're filled with hope and trepidation for this world that appears to be their long-sought salvation.

My eyes fly across the page, frantically reading. I lose myself in the summary. I turn pages, drink my coffee, pet Cat—all the while racing to see what Nate has decided to do with his crew.

For publishing purposes, summaries are usually a spoiler-ridden outline filled with tropes, character arcs, pivotal scenes, and plot breakdowns. Nate's unfolds exactly as I expect it should. He highlights the crew's hopeful new beginnings.

They establish a base on Kepler-452b and begin the complex process of terraforming and adapting—

Yes, yes, I know that! I skip ahead.

The planet's unique ecology and mysterious, ancient ruins hint at the presence of a past civilization not so different from Earth's.

We've discussed all of this! How the crew will unearth the history of an advanced alien species that once thrived on the planet, how these discoveries will shed light on the fate of the ancient race...

Nate continues on to detail the intercepted signals and the conflicting opinions of the crew about how to deal with this interstellar encounter, including the argument between Amelia and Julian, just like we discussed a few days ago.

Then, the strain of the mission begins to take a toll. Personal conflicts, doubts, and fears surface as they face the magnitude of their responsibility to humanity and the sacrifices they've made to get this far.

Toward the end, Nate goes into a lot of detail concerning the astronauts' final choice: remain on Kepler-452b, knowing they may never see Earth again, or return to a dying planet in the hopes of saving what remains of their species.

A Cosmic Penance explores themes of hope, resilience, and the weight of the choices made by these astronauts for the future of humanity. It's a grand and emotional conclusion to—

I reach the end but then I immediately flip back, trying to see if I missed something.

Fifteen pages. *Fifteen pages* and there's no mention of the evolution of Amelia and Julian's relationship.

WHY?

Did Nate change his mind? Is he going to have Amelia choose Marcus in the end? If I thought my heart was pounding before, now it's about to slingshot out of my chest altogether.

I read the summary through twice more, no skimming, no skipping ahead, before I sit back and just stare at the thing. My mind is racing. The summary is wonderful. My concerns for Nate's writer's block are now officially unfounded. He has this

project firmly in his grasp. If he can flesh out these concepts in a heartfelt way, his readers will give him a standing ovation.

That's really, *really* great, but WHERE IS MY LOVE STORY?

I feel absolutely hollow over what he's left out. For me, the potential romance between Amelia and Julian is pivotal to the story as a whole. Without their emotional entanglements, there's less at stake. It's the motive driving so many of their decisions.

I'm so perplexed I read it twice more because I don't trust my brain, my eyes, my reading comprehension skills. If Cat could read, I'd get him in on this as well. I need a second opinion, but I don't want to send this to Joy just yet. Would she be absolutely thrilled? Yes. I imagine she'll scream when she sees this pop into her inbox at some point, but I have to discuss it with Nate first.

I am his developmental editor after all, and we're about to develop the hell out of this love story. Just...as soon as he finishes typing.

I creep up the stairs again, and I don't even think he's come up for air since I last checked. If anything, he's typing faster now. How many words per minute is he striving for? I can't help but do a silent happy dance for him, arm pumping in the air and everything.

He's doing it.

He's writing!

And sure, he could be working on something else entirely, an in-depth manifesto about how much he wants me out of this cottage or a very descriptive review of my lovemaking skills or I don't know, details of his fence project! It doesn't matter! I get the feeling this is good news. He hasn't holed himself up in his room at his computer *once* since I arrived.

Suddenly, there's a break in the typing, and I jump on it.

I knock twice, gently.

"Nate?"

“Yeah?” Then, “You can come in.”

I turn the handle and push the door open, but only a crack. If there’s magic in his room, I don’t want any of it seeping out into the hall.

Nate sits at a narrow writing desk positioned in front of a window. Light streams through the glass, and the view is spectacular: blinding white snow as far as the eye can see, a herd of sheep just in front of a dense green forest.

Nate’s bed is perfectly made, untouched from the looks of it. His room smells like his soap and books. There are shelves up here, and I spy more foreign editions of *The Last Exodus* and *Echo of Hope*. Sheesh, there are so many of them. It’s hard to comprehend the sheer number of readers Nate has waiting on tenterhooks for this third novel.

I peer back at him just as he glances over his shoulder at me. Aside from the fact that his shirt is wrinkled and his hair is messier than I’ve ever seen it, this is the perfect image of him. A writer at work. So handsome it hurts. Sharp cheekbones, scruffy jaw. My stomach swoops as our eyes lock. After last night, the line between us has only tightened, drawing me toward him like a moth to a flame. I’ve been so careful with my feelings today, treating them like a fresh bruise, one I should be careful not to touch or press.

Nate’s eyes are tired and a little red, and it occurs to me that he might not have ever gone to sleep last night, not if he was up working on the summary.

“Everything alright?” I ask tentatively.

He smiles, and it unfurls something in my chest. “I’m working,” he says with a note of pride.

“Writing?” I venture, my voice filled with unrestrained hope. *Please say yes.*

He nods in confirmation, and there’s relief evident in his widening smile.

Oh my god. I want to scream, but I gather myself quickly enough and rein it in. *Just act cool. Don’t spook the creativity out of him!*

“Are you hungry?” I ask.

His eyebrows furrow like the thought that he might need food only just occurred to him. He nods. “Starving.”

I hold up a finger. “I’ll bring you something.”

“Maybe some coffee as well?” he says with pleading eyes.

“Coffee. *Yes*. I’ll be back.”

I close the door and hurry down the stairs. I don’t want to take long. I imagine he’s starving, so I whip up eggs and ham and buttered toast. I pour a piping hot cup of coffee filled so close to the brim that I have to carry it up the stairs separately or risk scalding myself.

When I toe his door open, Nate is writing again. The floor creaks beneath me but he doesn’t even flinch, and I take it as a cue that I shouldn’t interrupt him. I can’t imagine how good it must feel to be in a flow after wondering for so long if the words would ever come again. I could cry for him, *hug* him, but I can’t be a distraction.

As it is, I set down his food and coffee on his desk, and then I tiptoe back out of the room. Just before I close the door behind me, I glance back at him and watch.

Even before I met Nate, I was a huge fan of his books. It occurs to me now that I have a front-row seat to his creative process, and it’s a little like watching Van Gogh swirl colors onto canvas, only the world Nate is crafting is completely hidden from view. I’m desperate for his story. If he asked me to glance over a single paragraph, a sentence even, I would jump at the chance.

He pauses and I worry he’s aware of my attention on him, so I shut the door quietly and go down to clean up breakfast. The next few days continue on like this: me staying completely out of Nate’s way while trying to be as useful as possible. I mark up the summary with line edits only because it gives me something to do. I vacuum downstairs and give the kitchen a good scrub-down, going after the counters, sink, and floors.

A week after he started writing, around lunch, I hear the shower run upstairs, so I hurry to make Nate a sandwich and drop the plate off on his desk while clearing his breakfast dishes. His laptop is asleep, the screen's black, or else I would try to steal a peek at what he's writing. I bump the desk just a *smidge*, but the laptop doesn't stir awake, and anything beyond that would feel like crossing a line. Dammit.

Nate doesn't emerge from his room that day until I'm prepping dinner. He whips past me, grabs his coat off the hook behind the door, and barely mutters something like "Going on a walk" before he's gone.

I hurry to the window and watch him stomp down the path. I have no idea where he's headed, but by the time I finish making a chicken and rice soup and some flaky soda bread to pair with it, he's still not back. I leave the pot of soup simmering on low so it'll be warm for him. Then I reclaim my cozy spot by the fire and eat while I read.

I jump out of my skin when the back door opens a half hour later. Nate's covered in snow flurries, the tip of his nose red from the cold, his blue eyes bright and sharp.

"Where'd you go?" I ask, hurrying to stand so I can get him dinner.

Nate yanks off his coat. "Nowhere. I just needed to walk. It helps sometimes."

The moment his boots are off, he heads back up the stairs in a rush. Not another word, no pleasantries. I don't realize how hopeful I was for his company until I hear his door shut behind him. The cottage is so lonely with him stuck up in his room. I deliver his dinner and he mumbles a thank you, his eyes never straying from his computer. I can't help but feel invisible.

I wonder if this is the way he always works, frantically getting words down, or if this is the result of suffering writer's block for the last few years. Maybe there's a fear that at any minute, the well will dry up.

There's a strange mixture of emotions swirling inside me. The InkWell employee and developmental editor *and* Nathaniel Foster fan is dying over the fact that he's in there working on book three right now. The woman Nate slept with the other night, the person sharing a home with him is feeling juvenile and insecure and frustrated. I understand that we agreed what happened is best left in the past, but it seems like moving on completely has been a little too easy for him, like it's no hardship at all to cast me aside.

I can't dwell on the hurt though. This is objectively good on all sides. I don't want to continue acting unprofessional with Nate. I don't want to have to resist his advances, mostly because I know I couldn't. If he so much as looked at me with a warm expression, I'd fling myself at him, and I hate knowing that. I feel weak and naive.

I liked Nate's idea to take a walk. I've been stuck inside the cottage for far too long, just like him. He went without mittens or a hat, but I layer up to the point that I'm 99% wool.

It's dark out so I don't plan to go far, just around the property and down the lane heading for a familiar English oak tree that we pass on our way to and from Sedbergh. According to Nate, it's over 200 years old.

My borrowed flashlight does a good job of lighting up the path ahead of me. I expect a passing car or two, but it seems like I'm the only one out here for miles around. It's dead quiet except for the whisper of the snowflakes and the occasional owl hooting in the distance. I hear paws scurry once and almost catch sight of what could be a small fox or rabbit, but by the time I get my flashlight trained on the sound, it's already gone.

I don't take walks like this in the city, ones where I'm this alone with my thoughts. There, I usually have a podcast or audiobook drowning out the sound of traffic and pedestrians whirling past me. What will it feel like to go back to that? The chaos will be hard to stomach now, I think. In some ways I think this trip has changed my DNA.

While I walk, as a way to force myself to stop dwelling on Nate and our complicated relationship, I daydream about what I envision for my future now that Andrew is out of the picture and there's no romantic relationship tethering me down. I live in New York because I've always lived there. It puts me near my family and the office, but a lot of InkWell employees work remotely these days, and it wouldn't be hard for me to put in a request to do the same.

If I'm looking to live in a town similar to Sedbergh, I could always search in Upstate New York. It would be hard to duplicate the charm of this place though. I'm in love with the village even now in the dead of winter. I can't imagine what it's like here in the spring and summer, the massive hills so green and verdant, trees canopied over the narrow roads, the book festivals drawing in hundreds of tourists, Alice's shop busy with readers and collectors. I would help her if she ever needed an extra set of hands, stocking shelves and ringing up customers. It's a vision so clear I can taste it—what life could be like here.

Then I realize what I'm doing and I panic and shake the thoughts free. It's a fairy tale. My time in England has to end, the same way any great vacation does.

It's hopeless to even imagine myself living here because deep down, I know my life's trajectory. It might seem fun to fantasize about a future in Sedbergh, but more likely than not, a month, a year, *five* years from now, I'll find myself in Manhattan, at my InkWell cubicle, in a relationship with a man one slight variation away from Andrew Miller. People might even confuse the two. This new guy will have blond hair instead of brown, he'll work in commercial real estate instead of investment banking.

God, that's depressing. It's like my life has already been set in motion, and whether or not I want to change course, it feels like it's already too late. *Is it?*

The question spurs a montage of scenes in my mind's eye, collected over the last few weeks. I see version after version of Nate: him restraining a biting remark as he watches me pour too much cream into my coffee in the morning; his brows

furrowed in mock annoyance when I steal the last square of chocolate out of his hand; his blue gaze holding me captive as he approaches me slowly, hell-bent on stealing a kiss.

It feels like I've just gotten the wind knocked out of me.

This desire penetrates everything—even more than I realized—and though I've tried to stifle my feelings, they've grown like a weed in spite of it all. I stand here, thinking over my future, and all I can seem to gather is that I would really like to be kissed by Nate again and again, as long as we both shall live.

I choke on a half-laugh half-sob.

It's hard to believe. I always thought I was completely numb to feeling. I assumed there would never be a man to draw me out of my shell. It's silly now that I used to worry about my ability to fall in love, like that part of me was permanently undeveloped or broken.

Oh Nate.

I pinch my eyes closed and rub them, but it's no use. I'm in love and now there's no way to stop this.

With everything in sharp focus, I start my walk back to Nate's cottage in a comatose haze. I stare down at the ground where my flashlight lights the path, but I don't look beyond it. I reach the back door and turn the knob and there's Nate, standing at the sink cleaning up dinner.

My heart pounds like I'm worried he'll know where my mind has been this last half hour.

Dreaming of you.

He glances over at me and he doesn't smile, but then neither do I. I think my entire face is frozen solid. I'll have to wait for blood flow to return to my extremities before I can be counted on to make a facial expression of any kind.

"You don't have to do that," I tell him, nodding toward the dishes.

I feel guilty for leaving a mess, but I was going to get to it right when I returned from my walk.

Nate shakes his head. “It’s fine. I don’t expect you to clean up after me. That’s not your job.”

Right, well...what exactly *is* my job at this point? InkWell sent me here to help Nate get going on this third book, and as of a few days ago, I’ve achieved that goal. I feel useless now, in his cottage, annoyed that we’ve found ourselves in this liminal space: not enemies, not coworkers, not exactly friends and not exactly lovers. I don’t know how to exist.

I don’t move from in front of the door. It’s not just my face that’s frozen, apparently. My whole body is stuck here on the threshold.

Nate turns off the water and looks at me curiously. He sighs and comes over to where I stand. He unzips my jacket, and once it’s hanging on the hook on the door, he looks at me long enough for me to realize he’s waiting for me to lift my gaze.

I can’t.

We haven’t touched in days. I thought we were keeping our distance or something, but I don’t have it straight anymore. It’s all too hard to keep track of at this point.

He lifts his free hand and wraps it around to cradle the side of my neck, tilting my chin up ever so gently with his thumb. His eyes study mine, and I try not to tremble. “Why did you go on a walk?”

I’m not ready to answer that question, so I divert. “Why did *you*?”

His mouth quirks with amusement. “A certain paragraph in my manuscript was bothering me. I couldn’t work it out before.” He nods his chin. “Now you.”

“My life is bothering me. I couldn’t work it out before.”

His gaze turns serious. “And now?”

I look away. “And now I have my answer,” I say with a conclusive sigh. “Now let me go finish washing those dishes so I can be useful.”

Instead of listening, he keeps ahold of me. I just know he's going to ask me more, but I can't let him get close to my wound. This whole thing could unravel so quickly. He strokes my neck with his thumb, eliciting the most delicious twist of desire. *More*, my heart demands. *Another night and then when that's not enough, one more after.*

"You didn't include anything about Amelia and Julian in the summary," I say faintly.

When he doesn't reply, I peer up to see he's frowning.

"It'll be in the manuscript," he says tersely.

"But why not include details in the summary?" I press. "It's important."

He pulls his hand off me. "It's not something that can be condensed in a meaningful way. InkWell will discover my plans for Amelia and Julian when I hand in my first draft."

It feels like he's brushing me off.

Fine.

I turn away and cross my arms. Already, I'm bracing myself for more of the same. He'll turn and head upstairs, he'll close his door, and I'll be left in the deafening silence.

But then instead, he lowers his head and rests his forehead against my hair, sighing like he's defeated. "I-I can't do this anymore, Summer. I can't have you here, needing you..." He stumbles over his words and shakes his head. "I can't pretend otherwise. I'm so selfish, I know." He reaches out and grabs my shirt, fisting it. "For your career, everything hinges on this project, and I can't put you in this position—"

He doesn't realize then. He doesn't know what I have to do if we're ever going to get this to work.

"It's okay. I'm leaving, Nate."

He closes his eyes as the words wash over him. For a moment he gathers himself, and I think he's going to return to the dishes, giving me no reaction outside a simple nod. Just like with Andrew, there will be no fight.

Then he rolls his jaw, clenching it resolutely as he stares down at me. “*No.*”

The word is so sharp it could cut.

I laugh, slightly startled. “What do you mean *no*?”

The heat of his gaze makes it feel like I’m bathed in fire. “You can’t go, Summer. I...”

“*Can’t go?* Why not?! You’ve ignored me for *days!* You’ve acted like I don’t even exist. You don’t need me as—as your developmental editor...or anything else for that matter.”

I close my eyes, immediately regretting the petulant outburst. He wasn’t ignoring me out of spite. He’s been working. I know that.

“My developmental editor?” He laughs like the idea is utterly preposterous now, and I open my eyes again to see he’s tugging his hands through his hair. “It’s beyond that, Summer! By now, you must know the truth. You must feel it. From the first night I met you, I was immediately attracted to you, but there was Andrew and my writer’s block, and all of that aside...” He swallows and steels himself. “I wasn’t eager to get into another relationship with an editor.” His brows furrow, and it’s like the emotion is bleeding out of him now. All of this has been pent up for so long. “But what I feel for you is beyond that. I c-can’t stop this. I’m not going to keep holding myself back.”

It’s impossible to keep my chest from filling with hope.

“Nothing else matters anymore, Summer. I’m dying here. I’m—I’m *going mad.*”

My hands start to tremble at my sides. This is all so overwhelming. I’m not used to this. With Andrew it was never...

I start to curve around him, but Nate doesn’t let me pass. His hands grab my arms and he centers me right in front of him, lowering his face so that our eyes can meet. “And if I was ignoring you, it’s because I thought I was doing the right thing giving you space.”

I immediately drop my gaze.

“Summer.”

I stare down at the floor, focusing on the wood grain.

“*Summer*,” he says again, harder this time.

I have to look at him, and so I do, with no shield or sword.

“I thought I was doing the right thing leaving you alone the last few days...but now I’m not so sure.” His gaze flits between my eyes like he’s desperately searching for answers. “I wish you would talk to me.”

My lips part, but I can’t yet reply.

He groans and leans in, letting his face press against my hair. “What am I supposed to do here? I’ve been trying to fight against this. I know you need to get back to your life, know you just got out of a relationship and you’re here—*god*—you’re here to work and I’ve put my hands all over you when I never had the right to. I should be apologizing. I should have told you about Elaine. I’m sorry. *I’m sorry.*”

I stiffen, and he sighs.

“No apologies then?” His voice is growing louder, more demanding, as he pulls away to look at me again. “What do you want? Tell me, Summer. You went on your walk and you said you have your answer, so tell me. *Tell me—*”

Without another moment’s hesitation, I turn and rise up onto my toes and kiss him. Our mouths press together and every anxious thought, all the fury and tension of the last few days drift away like curls of smoke. We’ve abstained and been so good, but wrapping my arms around Nate’s neck and pressing my body against his feels like falling back into the most delicious bad habit.

Nate grips my hips and draws me to him, possessive to the point that I whimper. The realization that he’s been wanting this too—that he’s been suffering right along with me—sends a heady cocktail through my veins. Adrenaline, desire, bone-crushing need...it threatens to buckle my knees. This feeling is so beyond comprehension.

For once, I give in fully as Nate's hands rise up my back, coasting along my sides, skimming my ribs and my breasts until he finally takes a firm grip on my neck and pours into me with his kiss. My heart flutters as my hands fist his shirt.

I need him even closer somehow, his naked skin pressed against mine.

The thought barely takes hold and then I'm already undressing him, yanking up his shirt until he has to help me get it the rest of the way up and off. I'm not shy about touching him. His chest and arms and abs, those sloping muscles above his shoulders. I bend and kiss him, right above his heart. Then I move lower, skimming my mouth across his stomach.

"Summer."

My name falls on deaf ears. I close my eyes and taste his skin; already I know where I'm headed and what I want to do. He's so hard beneath his jeans, and I stroke him through the worn denim.

This is for me as much as it is for him. I was never overly eager to give this gift to Andrew. I did it occasionally because it seemed like what I was supposed to do, but never because I was desperate for it, not like now. I want to have as many experiences with Nate as I can. I want to know what it's all supposed to feel like with *the* person.

Fear lances through me, but it's too late to ignore the truth I've known for days. If this all falls apart, there will be no easy end. I'm in love and I've already started to believe in the fantasy of Sedbergh and Nate and a life beyond the one I've always lived.

I taste my way down Nate's toned stomach. I fill myself with his scent. He showered earlier so his soap lingers faintly on his warm skin.

I unbutton his jeans and push them down, and I look up to see Nate bewitched. His blue eyes are so soft and *wanting*. His lips are parted just enough for him to suck in a breath as I lean

forward, holding eye contact as I taste him. I grip his length in my hand and stroke him as my mouth closes around the tip.

Nate is mine in this moment the only way any person can belong to anyone.

His fists hang limp by his sides like he's scared to move, to break this spell between us. I'm not some fragile thing and I prove that to him, taking him farther into my mouth and sucking until my cheeks hollow out and a heavy groan spills out of him.

Now his hand goes to the back of my head. He applies just enough pressure to let me know he's dying for more, but I don't play by his rules. I'm the one on my knees and I refuse to rush this—torturously slow will have to do, and as his jaw tightens and his teeth clench, as his eyes spark with passion, I can't help but pull back and smile.

"You're wicked," he tells me, reverently stroking my jaw. I lean over and snatch his thumb between my teeth, just the same way he did to me the other day. Only *I* bite until he hisses and leans down, hoisting me up off the floor and carrying me away from the door.

"It's cold," I protest as he heads for the stairs.

He doesn't listen to my complaint. He has a goal to get me up to his room, and his long strides eat up the stairs and the hallway until we're there. Instead of laying me down like a shining white knight, he tosses me and comes up and over me like an evil villain. He nips my jaw, my neck. He draws up my shirt and peels down my bra and bites me *there*, just on the tip of each of my breasts until I arch up off the bed.

Oh my god. I want him.

I weave my fingers through his hair and tug until he looks up at me, and then I kiss him frantically—teeth clashing, tongues melding, lips swollen and red. His hands are everywhere, covering my skin and sliding under my clothes. He takes control of me like I'm on strings.

He tugs my shirt off then unclasps my bra and drops it off the side of the bed, and my nakedness takes possession of him.

I see the way his eyes hood as he looks down at me, his hands reach down to touch me. His eyes flit up to mine, and his expression sobers. His hands go still on my body, and I feel the way they shake as his nerves bleed out of him.

“I’m in love with you, Summer. Tell me you feel the same way. Say it and put me out of my misery.”

I can’t help but smile, drawing a lazy circle down his chest. “And if I loved you?”

Relief washes over him as he captures my hand and brings it up to his lips. “It’s almost too much to hope.”

I release an unsteady breath, trying so hard to contain everything he’s pouring into me, and then this need becomes insatiable. Our bodies take over as clothes slip away, my panties, his briefs—and finally it’s heated skin against heated skin. We’re so hot I’m surprised we don’t fog up the glass windows.

This is chemistry.

This is how it should feel.

We’re in such a rush. Everything has moved so fast up until this point, but now that I’m lying naked on Nate’s bed, he pulls away from me, leaving me without his weight to pin me in place. I worry, for a moment, that I’ll float away. As he slides away, my hands reach for him instinctively, but he takes them and drops them back by my sides. He holds them until he’s sure I understand what he wants. Any trace of boyishness has left his features. He looks so serious, so deeply reverent as he spreads his body out beside mine.

I hold my breath as his gaze dips. I bite my lip and fight against the urge to move and cover myself. It’s faintly mortifying to have him look over every inch of me. A part of me wants him to hurry up and take me, and yet I lie still as his fingers start to trail lightly up my leg, starting at my knee. I close my eyes and shiver, concentrating on his touch. My breath hitches as he reaches my inner thigh and I hope with everything inside me that he’ll go farther, but then he moves his hand away, starting over again near my ribs, skimming

higher until he strokes the underside of my breasts. He lowers his mouth and presses small kisses against my quivering stomach.

I lie so still, as if I hope he'll reward me for my compliance.

His fingers move again, drawing down the curve of my hip, skimming over my thighs and leaving me bereft. Instead of picking up steam, he goes in reverse, slowing down to the point of agony. He dips his head and kisses along the swell of my breasts, pointedly keeping it chaste. His touches are featherlight, and yet they overwhelm me.

His mouth moves teasingly close to my breasts, and I moan and arch up, begging. Still, his fingertips and mouth only taunt me until I feel so tense I'm nearly vibrating. He pays close attention, noting where I seem to be most sensitive. I shiver when his hands draw down the center of my abdomen, and when he does it again, my fingers fist against the bedsheets.

He stokes a fire in me, pushing me further and further toward the edge.

“Nate. *Please.*”

I don't recognize the desperation in my voice. The hitch. The plea. The wantonness.

Finally, Nate's left hand catches my hip, holding me in place while his right hand slips between my legs, parting them as he touches me so expertly, watching for every reaction, listening to every gasp. It's too easy for him now that he's dragged this out. I could come apart from nothing at all, the shifting of air. Yet still, he draws out my pleasure until my nails are dragging down his arms, until my mouth finds his and I beg him with urgent, soul-searing kisses.

When my skin is slick and I'm hot and aching—when I think I can't take this agony for one more moment—he comes up and over me. I hold my breath, watching every inch he sinks inside me. Too much, too tight, too deep—that's the way

it feels until he kisses me into acceptance, rolling his hips gently until I relax down into the sheets, languid and hot.

His mouth is near my ear when he says, “You asked me why I left out the relationship between Amelia and Julian in the summary.” I gasp as he pulls out and thrusts back into me. “You want to know what it feels like when he finally has her? When she’s underneath him for the first time?” He kisses my neck, scraping his teeth against my skin, and I arch up to give him better access. “How can I possibly put this on the page, Summer?” he asks as he hits a new, deep part of me that makes me suck in a sharp breath. “How can I convey what he feels for her?”

He sounds utterly incensed.

Sparks travel down my skin when his hands find my breasts, palming them possessively, and then he’s thrusting into me, maintaining a relentless pace as my legs wrap around his hips. Every piece fits. It’s no less overwhelming than the first time, but I don’t cry. I spread open for him, my heart his for the taking.

I’ve been hanging on by a thread since he began to touch me, and now it’s too hard to stave off the inevitable. He pulls his lips away from me and slides his hand between our bodies, swirling his fingers, and all at once, everything comes alive as I shatter. I squeeze him tightly as I cry out, and he groans into my neck. On and on. I think I barely remember to breathe. His name slips past my lips and then I feel him coming too, feeding off our shared pleasure.

For a long time after, we breathe together, his chest expanding as mine contracts, and when I open my eyes, I see him already watching me, his gaze soft and hopeful.

I smile, and he leans down to kiss me. Short and sweet.

Then he slips off to the side of me, but when I make to get up, he holds me against him.

“Not yet,” he says, when what I think he means is, *Not ever.*

We lie in his bed as a tangle of limbs. For a little while we're quiet, gathering thoughts.

I'm the one to speak first, but I don't look at him, finding it easier if I keep my attention on the bookshelves across the room. "I feel like I should tell you my mind is already made up."

He's drawing circles on my shoulder when he replies with a resigned, "Go on."

"Tomorrow, I'm going to have you drive me to Leeds, and I'm getting on a plane back to New York."

He stays quiet. "Well, if we're being honest, I don't want you to go." Then more vehemently he adds, "*Stay here.*"

I can't let his words seep in. "Nate, I can't."

"Why?"

"Well, for starters, I don't belong here in this way anymore, as an employee of InkWell."

I mean, clearly, we're well past that. We're naked in his bed, after all.

He looks up at the ceiling. "I wish the timing were different. Or circumstances. Or...I don't know."

I smile. "I'm not sure how we would have met otherwise, you being a hermit and me living in another country. If not for work, I wouldn't be here."

His expression pinches tight with frustration as he looks down at me. "Summer, you must know my last relationship with Elaine has nothing to do with my feelings for you. I only brought it up the other night because I wanted you to know my history—to know how complicated work and life has been for me these last few years."

"I know. I promise I understand now, Nate." I lean over and drape myself across him, laying my head on his chest. "Has it been nice writing these last few days?"

He plays with my hair, twisting the curls around his fingers. "It's hard to describe. I feel like I reclaimed a piece of

myself. Writing is an extension of my soul.”

“Sounds like a kind of psychosis,” I tease.

He laughs and tickles under my arm. “Probably is one.”

I twist out of his grasp and turn to prop my chin on his chest, looking up at him. “Will you send me the book once you’re done with it?”

His expression turns contemplative. “I wouldn’t have to send it if you’d stay here. You could read it as I write it.”

I swallow past the emotion his invitation elicits.

I want that so badly, but it can’t happen. I don’t want to be tied to this book in that way. Nate has been so clear on his struggle to write. I worry if I stay, he’ll see me as a crutch, the same way he saw Elaine. Whether or not it’s true, I don’t want to muddy the waters. Nate needs to know he wrote *A Cosmic Penance* completely on his own.

“I’m not going to remain on the project. Beyond the personal reasons, I don’t actually think InkWell would have paired me with you if they weren’t desperate, and now that you’re actually working on the manuscript, they’ll likely call in the big guns anyway.”

He frowns as he brings his hand up to my face. His finger traces the edge of my cheek and his gaze follows. “I’d prefer if it was you.”

I smile sadly. “It can’t be.”

He doesn’t argue because he knows I’m right. “Still, I want you to stay. Book or no book.”

Oh my god. He can’t keep asking because I’ll do it. I’ll stay.

I gather what’s left of my willpower. “I can’t, Nate. I have a life back in the States.”

“One you want to get back to?” His eyes find mine, and our gazes hold. His furrowed brows are so telling—he can’t bear the thought of me leaving for good.

“For closure, yes.” I nod. “I’m going to request to work remotely with InkWell.”

“Could you see yourself living here? With me? I have an apartment in New York too. We could stay there for part of the year...”

“Yes. I could.” I decide to go with brutal honesty at this point. “I want that so badly.”

He’s still talking, rushing on like he hasn’t heard me properly. “I can get cable and internet if that’s what you want. Plenty of my neighbors have it. Is that why you’re really running away? So you can catch up on your shows?”

I laugh and come up and over him, kissing his neck. “Nate, you fool. I *want* to stay here. I *want* to be with you so badly, but you have to finish your book. You have to finish the series on your own.”

For so long he doesn’t speak. He watches his finger trace along my jawline as he comes to terms with what he knows is right. Then his gaze lifts to mine again.

“Alright. You’ll go back to New York for a short time. And then...” he whispers hopefully, running his fingers down my spine.

“*And then...*” I confirm, kissing his mouth and letting him pull me back under the covers.

I doubt we’ll sleep at all tonight.

CHAPTER 26

SUMMER

One week later

I'm sitting on a leather chair in the InkWell offices staring out at the cityscape beyond the bank of windows to my left. It's a gray, overcast day, so cold my teeth chatter just thinking about my walk home later.

Returning to life in New York has been just as jarring as I expected it to be. No more storybook village. No more little shops and quiet pubs. No more cottage. No more Nate.

Everything I once loved about the city seems unbearable now. The sludge sitting in piles on the sides of the streets, the crowded sidewalks, the pressure of the metropolis beating in from all sides. Everyone has entirely too much access to me. My phone pings with text messages and work emails at every moment. Even when I turn my TV off, trying to replicate the peace and quiet of Nate's cottage, I can hear my neighbor's TV blaring through the living room wall. I want to be able to cook in my apartment, but there's no oven, and the electric burners on the stove barely get hot enough to boil a pot of water. I put in a request with my super, and I've been placed at the end of the long line of people with maintenance requests. So maybe come summer, it'll actually be fixed. Hopefully, by then, I'll be long gone...

I haven't seen my family yet. I'm supposed to meet them for dinner tomorrow night. Emma's made a reservation at her favorite restaurant, and she cc'd Andrew on the email about it. He must have immediately reached out to her because a half

hour later, she sent an amended reservation that didn't include him.

I thought she might have called me to ask about Andrew, but we still haven't talked.

"Summer?" Joy pokes her head out of her office, and when I turn, she waves me in.

I stand and smooth the wrinkles out of my skirt before I go in for our meeting.

She reclaims her seat behind her desk and smiles at me. "First of all, I just have to say, I'm really impressed." I flush as she goes on. "We've reviewed the summary Nathaniel provided as well as the first few chapters of *A Cosmic Penance*, and we're extremely excited to see where he will take this project." She leans in and her eyes widen. "Honestly, I still can't believe he's writing."

It's been a week since I left England. A week without Nate.

He drove me to the airport and wrapped me in a tight hug, bending to whisper, "Don't go. I'll drive us back right now. Quick, get back in the car."

I laughed and shook my head.

I had to leave; there was no way around it, but that didn't mean I didn't tear up as he held me, didn't consider for one wild moment saying *Screw it* and letting him cart me back to his cottage forever.

"I have to go, Nate."

I tipped my head back and he cupped my cheeks, his eyes flitting back and forth between mine, likely searching for a chink in my armor, some way he could convince me to stay.

"I'm only letting you go *for now*," he declared with fierce determination. "When you're over there, so far away, don't forget you're mine."

You're mine.

I cried on the airplane coming home, crammed in my economy seat as tears slipped down my cheeks. It felt like I was leaving my heart in England, making the wrong decision, somehow. The woman beside me pretended not to notice, though she did slide me a tissue from her purse. And later, when our meal arrived, she gave me her dessert too.

“I think you need it,” she said softly.

I did.

Joy takes a sip of her coffee before continuing, “I do think you should know that Nate sent an email yesterday praising your work. He said we’re lucky to have you.” She frowns, studying me. “To be clear, I would have pushed to have you stay on the project. I know you’re a junior editor, but it’s clear you and Nathaniel had chemistry together. I doubt this book would be happening if not for you.”

Chemistry.

Ha.

If she only knew.

“I just didn’t feel comfortable continuing.”

She studies me. “Was everything okay? I know the setup was a little unconventional.” She cringes after hearing herself. “Okay, scratch that, *a lot* unconventional. I’ve been in this business for twenty years and I’ve never had to live with an author.”

I smile. “It was fine. We grew close. Lines blurred.” I look down at my lap. “I wanted off the project because I don’t think it would have been possible to maintain a professional relationship going forward.”

With the responding silence, I glance back up to see her jaw has dropped. “Oh.” Then she shakes her head. “I didn’t realize...”

“It didn’t affect our work while I was there,” I tack on quickly.

She chuckles and points down at the printed summary on her desk as if to say, *Clearly*.

I'm not certain of the rules here. I wonder if I'm going to get reprimanded for admitting the truth to her. I have to imagine the InkWell board would be all too willing to look the other way on something like this considering they're getting what they've longed hoped for: Nathaniel's third book. I doubt they care *how* they get it so long as I didn't break any laws.

"Is that why you've been a little off?" Joy asks, tilting her head and offering me a sympathetic smile.

I try to retrain my expression. Have I been giving too much away?

"Off?" I ask innocently.

"You've seemed a little down since you got back from the trip." Her eyes become worried. "You still like it here, don't you? Working at InkWell?"

"Yes, I don't want to leave or anything." I pause and then go for it. "Though, I have been wondering how complicated it would be for me to work remotely. I know other editors do it. I understand I'm newer and haven't put in my time like they—"

She laughs and cuts me off with a wry smile. "Summer, I don't think you quite realize what you've been able to accomplish with Nathaniel. I owe you, *big time*. So if you want to work remotely, let's give it a try. That should be no problem so long as your work doesn't suffer. Do you know where you'd like to go?"

I swallow and nod. "Yes."

She smiles, slightly suspicious, I'm sure, but she doesn't press me on it. "Right. Well, let's keep things like they are for a few weeks. I will need to clear everything with HR, of course. Why don't we aim to have you switched over by late spring, early summer? Will that work?"

"Yes," I rush out, a bit unbelieving that it could be this simple. "That would be great."

I stand and she comes around her desk to give me a side hug. "I really appreciate you tackling this project with Nathaniel. You should read the review he sent about you. It's glowing."

I smile, trying hard to conceal my blush. Nate already sent it to me. I've read it twice.

He and I haven't talked on the phone since I left England, but we've been in contact by email as much as possible. With the time difference, the cottage's lack of cell service, my work schedule, and *his* writing schedule, it just hasn't worked to reach him by phone. I sent him my first email the day after I arrived back in the States, letting him know I got home safely and was settling into life again. I asked him how things were going and tried to keep the tone light even though it felt like I'd made the worst possible decision by coming back here and leaving him behind.

His email was in the same vein.

Summer,

I drove into town to give you a call only to realize it's 2:00 a.m. your time and you must be dead asleep. Still, selfishly, I tried. Sorry if I woke you.

I'm glad you're home now, settling in. I'm sure everyone at the InkWell office is glad to have you back.

I've been working tirelessly since you left, so much so that my hands are on fire at the end of every day, but I can't seem to take my foot off the gas. This book is ceaseless and has taken hold of me. I dream about the crew and wake up in a rush to write.

I wish it wasn't the middle of the night there right now...I want to hear your voice. I'm not ready to go back home. The cottage is too quiet now. Even Cat seems sad without you here.

Hopefully we can talk soon.

I miss you.

Yours,

Nate

After that, we've stayed in constant contact. I send him rambling emails, recipes, memes, funny articles, book reviews, anything. Even so, not having easy access to him has thrown

me off. It's made me start to feel insecure about his feelings for me. There is a chance, of course, that everything between us was built off the initial rush of lust and chemistry and now that we've both stepped away from the whirlwind and separated ourselves by an entire ocean, those feelings will start to dissipate, little by little. The emails will trail off and the phone calls will never happen at all.

I'm glad at least that work has been busy. Joy has me on three different projects, each one at various stages in the pipeline. I have three weeks to read and offer first-round edits to an author debuting with InkWell later this fall. I'm fortunate that her book is good and vastly different from what I've been working on with Nate.

After my meeting with Joy, I stay late and work because there's no real reason to cut out early. When I do finally turn off my monitor and start to bundle up in layers, it's with a crummy attitude. I don't want to freeze my butt off on the way home. I don't want to have to decide what takeout I want for dinner. I want my stove to get fixed and I want—

I'm just outside the InkWell building when my phone rings in my hand. I've kept it near me at all times on the off chance Nate calls. The fact that his name is on my screen now is almost too hard to believe.

The stars have aligned.

I swipe my finger and answer.

“Hello?” I sound skeptical, like I'm scared this is a prank call or something.

I hear the smile in his voice when Nate replies, “I was hoping you'd answer.”

Oh my god.

His voice.

It sends my heart racing.

“Hi.” It's all I can manage without sounding like a fool. I have to gather myself now, act normal.

“Hi.”

“I miss you,” he tells me straightaway. “I should get that out of the way now. I miss you and I can’t stop thinking about you and if you’ll let me, I’ll buy a ticket right now. Come back to Sedbergh.”

“Nate.” I half-groan half-laugh. “Are you done with the book?”

He sighs, realizing I’ve won the argument for now.

“I miss you too,” I say gently.

“Have you changed—” “Do you think—” We talk over each other.

Nate laughs. “Nothing has changed, Summer.”

“Not for me either,” I confirm quickly, almost sick with relief.

“What are you doing?” he asks, turning the conversation toward something light.

“Walking home from work. What are you doing up still? It has to be close to midnight.”

“I planned to try to call you all day but I couldn’t break away earlier. I had to finish a scene.”

“Did you drive into Sedbergh?”

There’s no other way he’d have cell reception.

“I’m sitting in my car outside Martin’s shop,” he admits with a little laugh.

I’m hit with a pang of sadness. I can picture him there clear as day. I want to be in the passenger seat. I want to be able to reach for his hand.

An ambulance whirls past me, its siren blaring, and I wince and apologize.

“It’s fine,” he promises. “I can still hear you.”

I’m walking faster now, in a rush to get home. He can hear me, but I’m having a hard time hearing him and I don’t want him to think we should try again another time. I’m desperate for five minutes with him. “I can’t believe you called.”

“It’s been hard to catch you at the right time. I’m working like mad.”

“Why are you doing that to yourself?”

“The faster I write, the sooner I can come get you.”

“You’re ridiculous.” But I’m smiling ear to ear.

“You think I’m kidding?”

I shiver.

My apartment is just up ahead. The building is nothing to write home about. It’s a third-floor walk-up, not bad actually compared to so many other apartments around the city. I picked it based on its proximity to InkWell. Nothing beats a quick commute.

I sandwich the phone between my shoulder and ear while I fish my key out of my purse.

“Tell me about your day,” Nate prods. “Tell me anything. I’ve been so entrenched in writing I feel like I have nothing to tell you beyond what I ate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

I tell him about the book I’m reading for work, a domestic thriller from a new up-and-coming author.

“I’m tearing through it. This writer’s voice is so clear and fresh, and there’s a romantic element to the story that doesn’t feel trite. I’ll read more of it tonight after dinner.”

“What are you cooking?”

After updating him on my stove woes, I tell him I’m going to order Thai.

He groans. “I’m jealous. That’s the only thing I miss about the city, the restaurants.”

“You still have your apartment here,” I point out.

“Yes, and like I mentioned, I could see myself spending some of the year there, maybe late spring through early summer. Or fall. I love the city in October. Do *you* like the city in October?”

I laugh, knowing what he's hinting at. "I talked to Joy about working remotely."

"What did she say?" he asks, not bothering to mask his hope.

"To give it a few weeks."

"A few weeks. Okay. That should give me enough time to wrap up this first draft."

I laugh. "You're insane."

"Have you had second thoughts, Summer? Is this...?"

"No, Nate," I say, hurrying to cut him off. "I—I..."

I can't get the words out.

Silence stretches, and then Nate finally replies, "Me too."

CHAPTER 27

SUMMER

THERE'S a knock on my apartment door later that night.

"Coming! Hold on!" I shout, fighting with the zipper on my wallet.

It's the Thai food I ordered after I hung up with Nate. It's here faster than I expected, which is amazing because I'm starving. My mouth salivates over the yellow curry I'm about to inhale—

I whip the door open and Emma stands outside my apartment wearing a red wool jacket and coordinating silk scarf. My sister's blonde hair is styled in a new, sleek bob.

I haven't moved because I'm not sure she's actually here. She's perfect enough that she could be a daydream.

"Emma?"

All I want to do is rush to her and wrap my arms around her and squeeze.

She goes rigid, shocked by the intensity of my hug. Then she lets her purse fall to the ground and she wraps her arms around me too, tightening her hold until we're both having a hard time catching a full breath. When I pull away, tears swim in both of our eyes.

"Well...could I come in?" she quips.

"Yes. Of course." I step back to let her walk past me and then I peer out into the hall. "Where are Lincoln and the kids?"

"They're hanging out at home."

She came all the way to my apartment—trekked over here by herself—to surprise me? *Why?*

Emma is a busy mom and a busy physician. She doesn't have time to pop over on a random weeknight.

Of course, there's a chance she's here to talk sense into me about leaving Andrew. There is always the potential for our relationship to continue the way it has for years—her telling me what she thinks is best and expecting me to fall in line with her recommendations.

I'm not as worried about that as I would have been in the past. I'm done apologizing for who I am and what I want out of life. I'm done shrinking myself down, staying quiet, making excuses to appease my parents and siblings. Their expectations have crushed me my entire life, making me feel like my pursuit of something different was a pursuit of something criminal.

Being in England, putting distance between us, has given me freedom and clarity on our relationship. It's been a long time since Emma and I have existed in a positive place. My resentment and jealousy of her has been exacerbated by her controlling and domineering presence. I've allowed it because I thought that was what I needed, a big sister guiding me through life.

I thought I was a bad person for applying to graduate school programs behind her back. Her anger told me so. Now, though, I see the real source of tension for her might be something else entirely. Me stepping out of her carefully laid plans must have felt terrifying for her. She wants the best for me and she assumes she knows what that looks like: a career in medicine, a marriage to Andrew, a life that mirrors her own in so many ways. She doesn't hate my job in publishing. She hates that she can't see into the future for me, to ensure that I'm happy the same way she is.

Emma is not malicious or cunning or evil. She's my big sister and she loves me in ways that, at times, might not be helpful or healthy.

In the heat of my anger with her and my parents, I've wanted to scream and shout. That well has dried up though now. I just want to move on. I want to talk to her, but I don't want to rehash the past and point out the ways she's inadvertently hurt me. It's a relief, actually. It feels like taking off a heavy mantle I've worn for too long.

Emma drops her purse on a side table by the door then unfurls her scarf and stacks it on top of her things. She turns to me with a tight smile and a worry line creasing her forehead.

"I'd like to start by saying I'm sorry." She laughs when my jaw drops. "I mean it, Summer. I hate how we've been the last two years, and I know..." She heaves a deep sigh as if steeling herself before she continues, "I was the one who put us in such a dark place. I see that now. I spoke with Andrew after he got home from England, and though I will admit at first I was disappointed to hear that things are officially over for you two, he really changed my viewpoint on a few things.

"I know you and I are so different and we'll never see eye to eye on certain situations, but I was wrong to treat you—"

My heart breaks listening to her apologize. "Emma—"

She shakes her head. "I'm the big sister and I know I can be extremely overbearing. I'm supposed to take care of you and protect you, and I want to repair things. I want you happy."

"I *am* happy," I insist.

"With this new job?"

I nod, smiling. "I love it. I *love* what I do."

She looks so relieved.

"And what about this new guy?" she ventures. "You're happy with him too?" When I level her with a shocked glare, she laughs. "What? Andrew told me you're head over heels. He could barely believe it. *Are you?*"

Her eyes alight with wonder like she doesn't think it's possible.

I nod timidly, chewing on my bottom lip, and she squeals. “You’re kidding! *Tell me everything!*”

I know it’d be futile to try to hide my blush. “I can’t. It’s still so new and...” I shake my head. “I just don’t want to jinx anything.”

She holds up her hands as if she completely understands. “Got it. Okay. I just— You’re going to be careful, right? Not rush—” She sees my expression harden, and she blanches. “Right, yes. I just apologized for being overbearing and now here I am doing it again. You’re an adult. You’ve got this. Understood.”

I laugh and pause, looking her over. It’s still hard to believe we’re here right now, rebuilding things. I point over my shoulder toward the couch. “I’m not sure if you need to rush home, but if you want, you could stay for a while? I just ordered Thai and I *definitely* got enough to share.”

“Thai?” She groans playfully. “*Yes*. I’ve been doing this cleanse the last few weeks and all I want is something oily and sugary and *fried*. Please tell me you got curry.”

“I did, and shrimp dumplings, and ten other things too, I’m sure. I’m so hungry I was just clicking at random when I was ordering.”

She laughs and undoes her coat, laying it on her purse before sliding out of her shoes.

Then she joins me on the couch. “Do you think this throw pillow belongs? It’s so green compared to—”

“Emma.”

“I just think you’d be better off with something more neutral.”

“*Emma.*”

She throws up her hands. “Okay! *Alright*. You like the green. We’ll keep it.” Clearly it’s going to take her a while to change her ways, if it’s even possible.

I’m okay with that. Emma wouldn’t be Emma otherwise.

She plops down beside me and scoots close, dropping her voice. “Now, I know we can’t discuss him, but surely you can show me one *itty-bitty* picture of this guy. I’m curious about the man who’s made my baby sister fall in love. Andrew said his name is Nathaniel, but he wouldn’t tell me anything else.”

Who am I to deny my sister this? Besides, it’s fun to finally feel this zing of excitement, to have a real crush I can gossip about with her. We’ve never been able to indulge in this way. I’ve never been in love. I grab my phone from the coffee table, and though my hand shakes with nerves, I put Nate’s name into Google Images. Some of the pictures are old, but once I scroll down a bit, I find one that’s recent enough. It’s from a book signing and he’s so unbelievably handsome. In the photo, he sits behind a table wearing a white button-down and a leather watch, an uncapped Sharpie in his hand. His hair is freshly trimmed by a *real* stylist, not a nervous girl standing between his legs in his kitchen. He’s almost in profile as he smiles at someone just out of frame. Without facial hair, his features are cutting. His sharp cheekbones and strong jaw are beautifully in focus. His dimples pop.

There’s a sudden knock on my door.

The delivery guy arrives with our food just as I turn the phone to my sister. I’m sure he hears her shocked shriek. “OH MY GOD, SUMMER! THAT’S HIM?! Jesus. *Can we zoom?!?*”

EPILOGUE

SUMMER

I'M deep asleep when my phone rings beside my pillow. I have it set to the highest volume and I've chosen a ringtone so shrill and high-pitched it could wake the dead, all so there's never a chance I'll sleep through Nate's call.

He calls me at the same time every morning, rousing me from sleep and assuring that we get time to talk before I have to go to work.

I grab my phone and swipe my finger across the screen.

"7:49," I tease. "One minute early today."

He chuckles and it sends fire through me. "I couldn't wait."

I hear the smile in his voice, and I can't help but roll over and plunge my face against my pillow, stifling a toe-curling grin of my own. Since leaving England, Nate's effect on me hasn't worn off in the least; it's worse than ever. He's the best part of my day, every day.

"Are you up yet?" he asks, prodding me.

Nate knows I like to burrow deep in my bed for as long as possible. He also knows I get annoyed if I'm late. It's a tightrope we walk every morning.

"Fine," I say, flinging the covers off. "I'm up now and it's horrible. My apartment is like a freezer."

I grab my AirPods from my bedside table and switch the call over as I walk into my bathroom. I prefer to shower at

night rather than in the morning, which means I have to take a gamble on how my hair will look every morning. It's always a toss-up between electric shock and semi-decent.

"How is it today?" Nate asks.

"Wild."

He groans in agony. "Take a picture."

I snap a photo and text it to him. There's a lull and I assume he's looking at it, because a second later, he laughs. "You're wearing my sweatshirt. I thought it was dirty."

I grab my toothbrush. "I did a load of laundry last night."

"You braved the laundromat? Is the one at the end of your block finally open again?"

"No, I trekked to the other one, but I had no choice. I *had* to. I'd worn your sweatshirt six nights in a row. I couldn't push it one more day." I talk while brushing my teeth and am surprised he can even understand me.

"You should have called me. I'd have kept you company while you were there."

I wanted to. "It was late for you."

"I would have stayed up."

I know it's true, but he needs sleep if he's ever going to finish his book.

"Where's my photo?" I demand before rinsing my mouth and walking into my closet. "I want my daily allotment of eye candy."

"I tried to send it, but it's not going through."

It's silly, but my heart sinks. While dating someone long distance, sometimes you rely on the little things to get through. I love getting a daily selfie of Nate. Occasionally, he'll include Martin or Cat. I was so envious the day he sent a photo with Dog. Once...*okay*, more than once we've sent each other naughty photos. *Those* are the absolute best days. Those phone calls usually...devolve quickly. I can't imagine what my

neighbors have heard through the walls. Ugh, I can't even think about it without blushing.

"What's the outfit going to be today?" he asks.

"I was thinking corporate casual," I say with mock seriousness.

"Corporate casual," Nate agrees, affecting the same tone. "Sounds like a good call."

"Blue or black pants?"

"You wore blue yesterday, so black."

There is nothing too mundane for our phone calls. I would listen to Nate read off his utility bills, and I know the feeling's mutual.

Once we've talked through breakfast and I finish getting ready, I set out on my walk to InkWell.

"Don't forget your keys," Nate tells me *just* as I was about to walk out the door without them.

I laugh and grab them from the bowl near my door. "How'd you know I was going to leave them?"

"Because you made coffee at home today. You always leave them behind on days when you make coffee at home. Probably something about your hands being full."

Huh.

Once I'm out on the sidewalk, Nate asks if the crazy hat lady is walking her dogs. I search the sidewalk, craning my neck looking for her. "We missed her," I say, not even bothering to keep the sadness from my tone. We keep tabs on crazy hat lady, and we take our surveillance seriously.

"Bugger."

"We'll try again tomorrow. No wait!" I erupt when I spot her up ahead. She's our favorite character in my morning commute. Better than pretzel guy and newspaper lady. "I see her! She's wearing a cornflower blue tea hat. *Roughly* the size of a sombrero. Her dog is wearing—hold on, someone is

walking in front—oh, yes.” I grin. “A coordinating sweater in the same exact color. He has a tiny tea hat of his own.”

Nate chuckles. “Perfect.”

“We really have to start cataloguing these. I don’t think she’s worn the same hat twice.”

“No, she did, remember? Last month, the red one with the feathers.”

I click my tongue. “You’re right. I’d forgotten.”

We go on talking for the ten minutes it takes me to make it to work. I go incredibly slow. I could cut the commute in half, but I dawdle where I can. Today though, I cut it too close.

“Hold it!” I say, in a rush to catch the elevator. I’m running a few minutes behind which shouldn’t matter because I don’t have any meetings today, but it’s the principle. I like to be at my desk, ready to tackle the day no later than 9:00 a.m., which is why I’m squeezing myself into this elevator and thanking the nice woman who held the door for me.

I smile at her. “Appreciate it.”

“Sure thing.”

“You’re so polite,” Nate says, teasing me. He knows I will not say anything to him in a jam-packed elevator, but it’s part of the bit.

Even on the elevator, our call doesn’t drop, but I go silent as we ascend toward the fourteenth floor, a place I’ll only be calling home for a few more days. Joy confirmed with me earlier this week that HR officially approved my request to work remotely.

“I still can’t believe you’re going to England,” she said during our meeting.

I smiled sheepishly, a little embarrassed. “Do you think it’s silly?”

Her eyebrows rose. “*Silly?*” She sat up, perfecting her posture, and then laid her hands carefully on her desk. “On the record, your personal life is none of my business. You don’t

need to worry how it will affect our professional relationship.” Then she smiled and leaned in, dropping her manager mask. “Now between me and you, if I weren’t happily married with three children under three and if *that man* were in any way interested in shacking up with me? Summer, I’d be on a red-eye tonight.”

I laughed. “It just seems kind of crazy. Doesn’t it seem crazy?”

She tilted her head, studying me with a gentle expression. “Is it? I moved here from Arizona for Bob when we were dating. People move for their partners all the time.”

Shocking as it might seem, Emma has been reassuring me as well. We’ve seen each other a lot over the last few weeks, and not just at family dinners. We’ve met for coffee and to get our nails done. I brought her lunch at her practice the other day just because I had a free hour. She’s even chatted with Nate via FaceTime a few times, and she’s slowly but surely warmed up to the idea of me going to England, so much so that she’s blocked off a week of her schedule in late summer. She and Lincoln and the kids are going to come visit Sedbergh during the high season.

“Okay. I’m walking to my desk now, I *really* have to go,” I tell Nate.

“Do you, though?”

I laugh. “*Nate*. Yes. Of course I do.”

It’s so hard to say goodbye to him in the mornings. Sometimes we just don’t. Occasionally, we’ll stay on the phone until my AirPods die. He’ll listen as I work and I’ll listen as he writes at the coffee shop. He’s even taken me into Martin’s shop once and let me say hello.

“I don’t think you *really* have to go,” Nate protests. “Can’t you explain you’re on the phone with me? Surely they’ll understand.”

“You’re not my author anymore,” I say, trying to be admonishing. “You haven’t been for two months. So no, I can’t pull that excuse.”

“Has it already been two months?”

“You know it has,” I say drolly.

Over two months, actually. 67 days of him writing from sun up to sun down in an effort to churn out 3,000 words a day. He only takes breaks to chop wood or go into town for groceries and our phone calls. I mailed him a care package a few weeks ago, filled to the brim with nothing but chocolate bars to get him through a particularly rough few days of writing.

“I’m almost done, Summer,” he tells me now.

A trickle of excitement sweeps through me.

“And then...”

“*And then...*” he repeats like it’s a line from a love poem.

Our motto has stuck because of all the possibilities it brings. Nate and I know what we want for our future. We’ve discussed it like two lovesick teenagers planning to run away together, except instead of stealing off to Vegas with the last hundred dollars we have left to our names, we want to organize the cottage’s guest bedroom and turn it into an office we can share. We want to plant a garden in late spring and help Alice with the summer crowd. We want to explore more of Kendal and the surrounding towns, and most of all, we want to tumble into his bed and stay there for days. It makes me laugh to think back to Nate putting that on our fictitious to-do list.

“Tell me you didn’t write that down.” I grinned.

“Yes, it says here, ‘Seduce Summer.’”

I still haven’t managed to hang up with Nate as I round the corner toward my cubicle and come to a screeching halt when I see a thick manuscript sitting on my desk. *Really?* Ugh. I already have three books I’m working on. Joy is usually so good about giving me a heads-up before she—

The thought dies a swift death once I see the title printed on the first page.

A Cosmic Penance – First Draft

My free hand reaches up to cover my mouth as I gasp. *It can't be.* Last we talked about it, Nate said he was still a week from being done. He confirmed it on the phone just yesterday.

“What’s wrong?” Nate asks, sounding worried.

“Nate...”

A laugh bubbles out of me as I round my desk and set down my work bag and coffee beside my computer. I reread the title again, dragging my pointer finger over the ink. I swear it’s still warm.

“What—what is this on my desk? Did you do this? *Did you send this manuscript?*”

“It’s the first copy. No one else has read it.”

Nate’s voice comes through my AirPods, but I also hear him *here*. My hand flies to my chest as I turn around to find Nate leaning against the doorway of my short cubicle, holding his phone up to his ear.

Nate, clean-shaven and handsome in a navy sweater, jeans, and boots. *Nate*, confident and relaxed, smiling like he’s been keeping the world’s biggest secret. He ends the call and pockets his phone with a twinkle in his eyes.

I take out my AirPods and toss them onto my desk. Already, my hands are shaking. My voice wobbles. “You said you wouldn’t be here until next week. You said you still needed time to finish and then—then you were going to come and get me.”

He can barely keep the amusement off his face. “I finished early and I couldn’t wait.”

Dazed and in love, I walk to him until he’s within reach. I press my hand flat against his chest and feel his beating heart. It thunders like a band of wild horses as I peer up at him, completely bewildered.

“I just...” I’m still in disbelief that he’s standing in front of me even while I have ahold of him. “How are you here right now? How can you *be* here?”

Tears gather in the corners of my eyes as his presence overwhelms me. His scent, his smile, his expression meeting mine with a gentle apology.

He brushes his knuckles tenderly across my cheek as he studies my movements, concern tugging his brows together. “It was hard to lie to you, but I wanted it to be a surprise. I wanted to show up here like you showed up in England.” His gaze lands on mine. “Upending everything.”

I laugh. “You say it like it’s a bad thing...”

“A bad thing?” He frowns and bends until our mouths almost press together. Instinctively, my chin rises as every nerve ending comes alive. We haven’t kissed in so long, and I’m so desperate to taste him again. “No, Summer. You were the absolute *best* thing.”

Then he kisses me, and like a key fitting into a lock, everything in my life slides smoothly into place. Falling in love with Nate, living in Sedbergh, chasing my dreams—it’s silly that I once thought it was all merely a fairy tale.

A COSMIC PENANCE ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

At the end of books, there is usually a long list of people the author deems worthy of acknowledging in relation to their work. The list usually includes editors and proofreaders, agents, research partners, friends, and loved ones. It's exhaustive and political. You fear leaving anyone out.

While it took a village to bring A Cosmic Penance to market, there is only one person who helped will it into existence.

To Summer, my love.

Thank you will never be enough.

You are my forever muse.

-Nate

AUTHOR NOTE & EXCERPT

I hope you enjoyed Nathaniel and Summer's story. While writing this book, I loved learning about Sedbergh, England's official Book Town. Most of the shops and restaurants mentioned in *Fighting Words* are real and you can visit them!

Now, continue reading for a sample of my bestselling romantic comedy **A Place in the Sun**.

SYNOPSIS

When her mother's incessant matchmaking hits an all-time high, Georgie Archibald does what any sensible woman would do: she flees the country.

Seeking refuge in the picturesque seaside village of Vernazza, Italy, Georgie's only plan is to lie low, gorge herself on gelato, and let the wine and waves wash her troubles away...that is until she wakes up in a bed that belongs to the most romantic-looking man she's ever seen.

Gianluca.

After going out of his way to rescue her, the former London financier turned mysterious recluse makes it clear that despite acting as her white knight, he has no plans to co-star in her fairytale.

But Georgie isn't asking for his heart—she's merely intrigued. After all, Gianluca isn't just gorgeous—tall and tan from days spent in the sun—his touch sets her world on fire. With him, Georgie experiences the most intoxicating passion she's ever

known, and it only takes a few steamy nights for her to realize that sometimes running away from trouble is the best way to find it.

A PLACE IN THE SUN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

R.S. GREY

CHAPTER 1

GEORGIE

HOW WAS NO one else seeing this?

The two middle-aged tourists in queue to enter the Colosseum were going at it like randy teenagers. The woman had her leg coiled up around her lover's waist and his hand had disappeared beneath her skirt fifteen minutes ago—the thing hadn't come up for air since.

She moaned into his mouth and fingered his hair. He growled like an undersexed werewolf, and then went back in for another snog with enough tenacity to suck her lips off.

I sat ensconced from my vantage point a few yards away, picking at a croissant and pretending to pay attention to a travel podcast about the Colosseum. In the last few minutes, the spirited performance had completely stolen my focus. Surely their oxygen levels were getting pretty low.

In all my twenty-six years, I'd never once kissed someone the way they were kissing each other. It was as if they were newlyweds on a transatlantic flight and the pilot had just announced that they'd lost both engines. God, if they went at it like that in full public view at the foot of a crusty old ruin, what on Earth did they do in private?

I blushed just thinking about it.

Eventually, a security guard with a red, pudgy face and an awkward manner asked the couple to politely refrain from boning in line, or so I imagined—his words were in Italian, so I couldn't be sure. The unflinching lovebirds disappeared

inside the Colosseum and I was left with my pastry once again. It's just me and you, carbs.

“Seat taken?”

I glanced up to find a devastatingly handsome Italian man with cool trainers and slicked-back hair. He was smiling down at me, pointing to the bit of stone to my left. I tossed my croissant aside and yanked my earbuds out so quickly they nearly took my ears with them.

In front of the Colosseum, there's not much in the way of seating. It's all brash vendors peddling plastic crap, pale-thighed sightseers running after their bored children, and pushy groups of veteran tourists spilling out of buses with expensive cameras around their necks. I'd sought refuge from the swirling sea of humanity on a distant rock in the only bit of shade I could find.

“Oh, yeah. All yours,” I said with a big smile.

The man sat down beside me, pulled out a water bottle, and took a long swig.

“Bellissima,” he said, tipping his water bottle in my direction, and for one tiny moment, my heart leapt. I didn't know much Italian—nearly none in fact—but every woman on Earth knows that word.

I blushed and opened my mouth to thank him before he pointed to the Colosseum. “It's beautiful,” he repeated, this time in thickly accented English.

Oh.

Of course. The crumbling heap.

“It's all right,” I grumbled, glancing back to the Colosseum so he wouldn't see my frown. Truthfully, it wasn't what I had expected. The street was crowded, the sun was blazing overhead, and the street performers waltzing around in skimpy gladiator outfits for photo-ops weren't half as sexy as I'd assumed they'd be. The latter was the issue that bothered me the most.

“You aren’t going in?” he asked, tilting his head to the queue spiraling around the base of the building.

I scrunched my nose. “It seems fairly self-explanatory from the outside.”

“You’re missing out,” he said before stuffing his water bottle back into his backpack and turning his full attention to me.

I shrugged. Maybe I was cheating myself, or maybe I was smarter than the sweaty masses filing in. Perching on my rock with my croissant and my podcast had been pretty nice up until the canoodlers had distracted me with their tonsil tennis.

“How long are you in Rome?” he asked, flashing a wide smirk in my direction.

This man was handsome, really handsome, and though I was due to leave the next day, I was hesitant to tell him that. If he wanted to sweep me off my feet and put his hand up my skirt while we stood in line at the Colosseum, I’d consider extending my stay.

“Well, actually I...”

My sentence faded out as a glamorous woman appeared behind him. The sun shaded her face so I couldn’t really make her out until she’d bent low and wrapped a possessive arm around the Italian man’s shoulders. There, with his head shading her face, I suddenly saw her dark eyes narrow into little slits right at me.

“Luciana, look, I’ve found us a new friend,” he smiled.

Luciana didn’t share his excitement.

I’ll spare the superfluous details and cut to the chase: Italian man had a girlfriend. The good ones always do. After a few minutes of terribly awkward conversation in which I tried to pretend Luciana wasn’t wishing me a swift, sudden death, my phone rang on my lap and I seized the excuse to flee. I scooted off the rock, gave my spot to Luciana, and promised to come back after I’d finished my call. It was a lie—there was a better chance of me sacrificing myself in the arena.

I curled around the side of the colosseum, using the massive structure to shade me as I answered the call.

“Georgie, finally!”

My brother sounded exasperated.

“Hello ol’ chum. What do you want?”

“When will you be at Mum’s? We’re waiting for you before we sit down for dinner.”

Oh, oops. Had I forgotten to phone and cancel?

“Don’t bother waiting for me, Fred. Eat up.”

“You aren’t coming? Mom’s expecting you.” He sounded a bit sad about it, which made me feel good. He used to find me so annoying when we were younger, but he was finally coming around. As he should. I was (objectively) the only person in our family with any personality.

“No, I’m not coming. You go on ahead.”

A group of young, rowdy American tourists ran past me then, shouting and pretending to be gladiators fighting one another. I tried to muffle the sound of their shouts through the phone, but it was no use. Freddie heard them.

“Georgie, where are you?”

“Oh, well actually...”

I glanced around me, trying to conjure up the name of a street back home in London. I’d lived there my whole life but my brain wasn’t cooperating.

“Georgie.”

“Well, as a matter of fact, I’ve gone to Italy.”

A massive moment of silence hung between us before he flipped out.

“Italy?! Since when?”

“Just yesterday. I meant to tell you.”

“Georgie, have you gone insane?”

I smiled. “No, brother. All is well.”

“Then why on Earth are you in Italy?”

“To find love, of course.”

I found myself in Italy the way I find myself in most places: by chance. The week before, I'd been sitting in a restaurant in London, partaking in another miserable blind date set up by my mother. The man sitting across from me was chewing with his mouth open. His massive chompers were spewing steak at a rate that concerned me—and the diners sitting within a five-yard radius.

In a moment of panic (I was particularly worried I'd become a new statistic taught to medical students: the first case of mad cow disease transmitted by sirloin to the eye), I realized I couldn't allow my mum to control my love life any longer. She was concerned for me, laboring under the outdated perception that if I were to remain single past twenty-six, I'd be branded a hopeless spinster, destined to spend my days scouring the streets for love.

Unbeknownst to him, Chompers served as a perfect example of why I needed to take my love life into my own hands. He was nearing forty in both years of life and strands of hair. His job was something like “insurance for insurance” and though he tried to explain it to me while chewing, after thirty minutes, I still didn't quite understand any of it.

It really wasn't fair to poor Chompers. He hadn't chosen to be the latest in the long string of terrible blind dates my mother had forced upon me, but in that role, he suddenly had to bear the cumulative weight of disappointment of all those who'd come before him. There was Mitch—the gouty muppet who had the personality of a dull housefly, Thom—my brother's naff friend who smelled perpetually of tuna fish, and Celso—a Spaniard who, despite looking fairly tidy, wouldn't let go of my hand through the entire dinner. I made it through the appetizers all right, but when I'd tried to cut my chicken one-handed, I only succeeded in flinging it off my plate and onto his lap.

The real problem lay in the fact that my brother—the golden child of our family—had found love and married years ago. He and his wife, Andie, had three chubby-cheeked children, and thus my mother was able to focus the full power of her matrimonial death beam onto me.

“You’re in your prime, Georgie!”

As if this was the seventeenth century.

“You’re getting older every day!”

She’d said this to me at my twentieth birthday party, just before gifting me an actual antique hourglass, making sure to emphasize the symbolism by flipping it upside down in my hands.

“You really ought to loosen your standards. That man who comes round your house every now and then is so handsome and in quite good shape.”

She’d been referring to the postman.

A few years ago, fearing that my status as single was a permanent problem, my mum had started enlisting the help of her friends and their “eligible” sons. I’d been a good sport about it, going on dates with men from nearly every county in England, but in the years since then, the novelty had lost its luster. Though I was no closer to marrying, I had developed a very clear list of requirements in a future husband. For instance, he must chew with his mouth closed. He must wash a few times a week and be taller than he is round. I used to think a sense of a humor would have been nice. I wasn’t asking for a Russell Brand or a Ricky Gervais, just a man who wasn’t a complete bump on a log. But those days were coming to a close—if my mother had her way, I would settle down with a well-meaning bump on a very average log.

After my date with Chompers, I’d left him on the curbside after dodging—you guessed it—an open-mouthed kiss. I took the long way home, puzzling over my problem. I wanted to find love as much as my mother wanted it for me. At twenty-six, I obviously wasn’t a spinster, but I was becoming a bit

lonely. I hadn't ever experienced a gut-clenching, obsessive, swoony kind of romance.

Obviously, it was time for a change.

But the need for change wasn't new. After each of these bad dates, I'd head home, working out how I'd break the news to my mother: no more dates. No more matchmaking. A week or two would pass, she'd bat her eyelashes, and I'd cave. I always caved, but not this time.

I knew if I was really going to make a change, I had to get out of London. My mother, bless her, would never leave me alone as long as I stayed within her reach.

So I'd done what any rational girl would have.

I spun a globe in our estate's library and promised myself I'd travel to whichever country my finger landed on. The globe's colors had blended together in a mess of blue and green and then I'd dropped my finger, abruptly stopping its rotation.

Syria.

Er, right. Minor hiccup.

I spun again and voila!

Italy!

Specifically, Vernazza.

Even though I'd never heard of Vernazza and needed a magnifying glass to see it on the map, I didn't spin the globe for a third time—I didn't want to get on destiny's bad side. Instead, I wrote down the name and rolled it over my tongue to get a feel for the pronunciation.

After a bit of research, I learned that Vernazza is one of five seaside villages that make up Cinque Terre. All five of the centuries-old villages are tucked into the rugged Ligurian coastline, and are only easily accessible by train—lovely, considering motion sickness was my fiercest enemy.

In an effort to break up the trip and spare my poor stomach, I'd flown into Rome first and planned a day of exploring the ancient city. After escaping the Colosseum, I walked along the cobblestone streets, turning the paper map in my hand and trying to maneuver around the crowds. I saw all the important sights that day. I stood in the center of the Pantheon under the massive oculus, boiling. It was noon and the sun was right overhead, blinding everyone in the room.

"Not incredibly practical to cut a hole in the roof if you ask me," I deadpanned to the ten-year-old beside me.

She sighed heavily and rolled her eyes, walking away with *Architecture of the Italian Renaissance* shoved underneath her arm. Very cultured, these kids today.

After that, I toured the Vatican and got in trouble for talking in the Sistine Chapel. They shuffled a thousand of us into the room at once, told us to zip it, and threatened to start chopping fingers if we tried to take photos. Still, an elderly Italian woman prodded my arm with her cane and pointed at her iPhone like she wanted me to help her take an illegal photo.

"Oh, I don't think you're allow—"

A baritone voice boomed overhead. "SILENCIO! SIIIIILLLEEENNCE."

I'd jumped a mile in the air, assuming it was the voice of God himself.

My final stop of the day was the Trevi Fountain. I chucked a euro over the crowds, but my aim was crap, and it ended up striking a woman in the forehead as she stood for a photo-op in front of the fountain. I shrugged—my wish had been to make the crowds disappear, and as the woman hurried off angrily, I counted it as a win.

Confident that I'd consumed the best bits of Rome and also anxious to flee the area in case the woman with the coin-shaped bruise on her forehead came back looking for vengeance, I turned back for my hotel. The sun was setting and my feet were aching.

In the morning, I would head to Vernazza and see what fate had in store for me.

In true Georgie Archibald form, I slept right through my alarm the following morning. It BEEPED BEEPED BEEPED over and over again and my brain—still exhausted from traveling—had assumed it was some annoying Italian songbird outside my window. Eventually, my subconscious brain realized that birds don't even sound remotely like alarm clocks, and I shot out of bed.

I looked at the time. “Arse! Bugger! SHITE!”

If I missed my first train of the day, I'd have a hell of a time making my connections. I tossed anything and everything into my suitcase, nearly taking half the hotel room with me. The train station was only a few minutes away, so I didn't bother with a cab. I shot across streets without looking both ways, nearly collided with a few cars, and made it past security with ten minutes to spare before the train departed.

It was an 11:20 AM departure for Pisa, packed with families on holiday. I took a deep breath, telling myself, I made it. I stowed my luggage then wandered down the aisle, glancing at the numbers posted above each seat. I was assigned to 11A and when my eyes landed on my backward-facing seat, I groaned. It wouldn't do; I had to face the direction the train was moving or I'd get sick.

I glanced around for an opening, but my late arrival had ensured that every last seat on the train was full except for mine.

“Sir,” I said, turning to the distinguished-looking man sitting in 11C. His seat was opposite mine, facing the right direction. It was a small move, but it would ensure I didn't spew up the granola bar I'd stuffed down my throat on the way over from my hotel.

He tilted his head up, a bit annoyed to be pulled out of his crossword.

I offered him a massive, pleading smile. “Is there any way I could convince you to swap seats with me? I get motion sickness on trains and I—”

He shook his head before I’d even finished.

“This is my assigned seat.”

“Of course, and I’m assigned to 11A.”

I pointed between the two seats as if trying to convince him of how small the distance was. He’d just have to pop up, rotate that impressively large bottom of his, and plop back down across the gap. Easy peasy.

“Then 11A is where I suggest you sit.”

On that note, he held up his crossword to cover his face.

I moved on to my next target: the woman sitting in 11D, but unfortunately, she was snoozing against the window, a bit of drool already rolling down her chin. I could have forced her awake and asked her to swap seats, but it seemed like bad form.

I tried one last glance around the train, displaying the most desperately tragic face I could muster, but everyone turned away, avoided eye contact, or offered up a blatant shake of their head.

Fine.

I sat down in 11A, dropped my backpack between my feet, and yanked out the supplies I carried with me whenever I traveled: chewing gum, ginger candy, peppermints, and Dramamine. I began to fortify myself for my impending doom, but it was no use.

By the time we’d chugged away from the station in Rome, dizziness had taken hold of my head and wouldn’t let go. I squeezed my eyes closed, willing the sensation to pass, but it only grew worse. I managed to make it to the toilet before throwing up the first time, but the second time, I made sure to look right in 11C’s eyes as I hurled into the paper bag. See? See what you’ve done to me?

Fortunately for me—and everyone else assigned to my car—I had a forward-facing seat for the next leg of the journey, from Pisa to La Spezia, but it didn't matter. By that point, my head was swimming and my stomach was rejecting everything I put in it. I considered stopping in La Spezia for the night, but it was still early afternoon and I'd intended on making it all the way to Vernazza before calling it quits for the day. I wanted to crash, but a bigger part of me just wanted to get the journey over with. I wanted a hotel room. I wanted a proper shower and a bed to collapse into.

Unfortunately, I'd underestimated how difficult the final leg of my journey would be. It was a short train journey between La Spezia and Vernazza, but the regional train was small and all the seats were full by the time I lugged my suitcases onboard. I was forced to stand, packed like a sardine, in the small compartment between two cars. My body was crushed against the side door, facing out. I desperately willed my nausea to pass; I'd used my last sick bag on the train to La Spezia and I really didn't want to traumatize the family of five laughing behind me.

The small train sped along the coast of Italy, through long, dark tunnels cut through rock. I caught my own reflection in the door's window and cringed. My brown eyes, usually bright and lively, had heavy circles beneath them. Strands of my long chestnut brown hair were coated with sweat and stuck to my cheeks. All color had faded from my face and the bit of throw-up crusted below my bottom lip served as the *pièce de résistance* to my entire haggard appearance.

I nearly caved then. It would have been so easy to call Freddie and beg him to come collect me, but in the blink of an eye the tunnel broke open and my vision was filled with an expanse of turquoise water.

It was blue in every direction, different hues painted across the landscape as far as my eyes could see. A cloudless sky met crystal clear waters. Angry waves crashed against the shore, spilling white sea foam over massive granite rocks that had tumbled down from the mountains over the centuries. I pressed my hands to the glass, leaned forward, and gasped,

nearly lost in the beauty of it, right before another bout of motion sickness overtook me.

Oh bloody hell.

“Mom! The crazy lady just threw up on me!”

CHAPTER 2

GIANLUCA

I PULLED MY baseball cap off my head and wiped my forehead on my shirtsleeve. It was dirty, just like my forehead was dirty, but it seemed better than nothing. I'd been out on the water all morning and had a boat full of fish to deliver to Massimo. He'd smile when he saw the sea bass; it was the biggest one I'd caught in weeks. He'd coat it in olive oil, bury it in a mound of sea salt, and bake it for some lucky tourist in his restaurant. I'd have envied them if I didn't have half a dozen fish to keep for myself.

I cranked my motor up another notch, slicing across the sea on my way back home. The waves were choppy, sloshing water up over the sides of my small fishing boat. I could feel the winds changing; I'd felt them all morning, playing with the currents and riling the sea. I'd almost skipped the trip out on the water, but I'd compromised instead, staying close to the shore in case things went south.

As Vernazza's tiny harbor came into view on the horizon, I let out a breath I'd been holding all morning, grateful to the sea for delivering me back home in one piece. The painted village stretched closer and I maneuvered my boat around the granite breakers. Of all five Cinque Terre villages, Vernazza boasted the largest true harbor. Even still, it could only fit a couple dozen fishing boats at once, nothing more.

My cousin was waiting for me on the breaker, smiling at the lot I'd brought back for him.

“Buongiorno, cugino?”

I threw him the line. “Molto buono.”

It was Saturday and the village was already bustling, alive with chatter. Life in Vernazza was centered around the restaurants in the heart of the village. Five of them dotted the perimeter of the square, carving out space of their own with wide-brimmed umbrellas. Tourists gathered underneath them, enjoying their lunches with enough wine and bread to last them well into the evening. Massimo and I worked together to unload the fish into a small cart. He’d roll it up to his restaurant—not one of the lucky five located on the square—and I’d head back up to my house and shower off the stench of fish and foam.

“Watch it!” I said, scolding the group of children running around the harbor, daring one another to jump into the water. It was safe to swim there; the water was calm thanks to the large partial seawall the village had built a decade earlier to shield itself from the power of the ocean.

The boys weren’t tourists. I’d watched them grow up for the last few years.

“And stay out of my boat, or tomorrow I’ll use you as shark bait!” I shouted over my shoulder before they’d run too far. I knew from their giggles it had been years since they’d taken my threats seriously. It didn’t matter; I had the boat’s key, so they couldn’t get into too much trouble.

“They call you the village grump, y’know,” Massimo said, nudging my shoulder.

I smiled, despite myself. “Good.”

The title fit.

“Have any plans tonight? Appuntamento romantico?”

I let go of the cart, no longer in the mood to help him push it up the square. “Enjoy your fish, Massimo.”

He groaned. “Aw, c’mon. S’only a joke! One of these days the answer will be yes, and I want to be the first to know!”

I’d have flipped him off if there weren’t so many children milling around. Instead, I walked away.

“Hey! Help me with this cart!”

I turned around to tell him off, but a sight over his right shoulder caught my attention instead. A woman had just stepped into the square from one of the side streets. She looked like most tourists did upon their arrival to Vernazza—a little frazzled and tired from lugging their suitcases on the train for so many hours—but there was something off about her. She paused and squeezed her eyes closed, leaning against the building behind her. For a moment I thought she just needed to catch her breath, but then I watched in slow motion as she tottered on her feet and, as if all her bones had been zapped from her body, collapsed to the ground.

“Shit!”

I ran for her, sidestepping chairs and tables and tourists.

“Move!”

A woman huffed as I collided with her shoulder. I threw an apology over my shoulder but kept running. No one else had seen the woman faint. There was too much going on in the square.

By the time I reached her, she was laid out on the ground, her brown hair covering her face. Her backpack had protected her head from the stone, but she hadn't regained consciousness yet. Massimo was right behind me by the time I reached her.

“What happened? What do we do?” Massimo asked, wiping his hand down his face.

I stepped forward and put my cheek right over her nose. When I felt her breath hit my skin, I exhaled.

“Well, she's breathing.”

“And her pulse?” he asked.

I brushed some strands of brown hair off her neck and pressed my fingers to the soft skin below her chin. It was steady.

“What the hell happened to her?”

I swallowed down my panic and shook my head. I had no clue.

A small crowd had gathered around her by then.

“É morta?!”

“I don’t think she’s breathing!”

It wouldn’t be long before the entire square had gathered to ogle her.

“She’s probably just dehydrated. Let’s take her in there,” I said, pointing to the building behind us. It was a lucky break, her passing out right in front of the building our family had owned for as long as anyone could remember. My grandmother had operated it as a bed and breakfast. Now it was abandoned, but it was out of the sun and the view of tourists, and we could call the doctor once we were inside.

Massimo unlocked the door, using one of the keys on his jingling chain.

We carried her in together, careful to keep her head steady as we pushed boxes and cobwebs out of the way. There was a bed in the bottom bedroom, one the manager had used when the bed and breakfast was still open. I shook out the bedding, checking for bugs, and watched as dust flew into the air. It wasn’t clean, but it was better than putting her down on the wood floor.

Massimo and I maneuvered her onto the bed and stepped away, giving her space. She looked like hell. Her hair was matted around her face, sweaty and stuck to her cheeks. Her skin was sickly pale.

“I’m going to go grab her stuff before someone nabs it,” Massimo said, darting out of the room and back out onto the street.

I knew I needed to move, to go find a doctor and help figure out what was wrong with her, but my feet were rooted in place. It’d been five years since I’d seen a woman lying on a sick bed, but the memories came flooding back all at once.

“Luca, come help with this bag!”

Massimo's voice snapped me out of my memories. I spun away from the bed and ran out to help him gather her things. The amount of luggage she'd carried with her could have filled four wardrobes. Massimo lugged the suitcase inside and I grabbed her backpack, which weighed more than she did.

"No wonder she passed out," Massimo laughed, groaning with the weight of the suitcase.

We were outside her room, dropping her things against the wall when I heard a rustling on the bed followed by an exasperated English accent.

"Oh my Liam Neeson. I've been taken!"

CHAPTER 3

GEORGIE

I'D SEEN MOVIES; I knew this was just what the gritty underbelly of the European sex trade must look like. I'd woken up disoriented in a dusty room. Very little light passed through the boarded-up windows and the stench of mildew hung in the air.

I'd known it was bound to happen eventually. My mother had given me great bone structure, and growing up with naff brothers had forced me to cultivate a fantastic (and apparently, highly abductable) personality. I supposed that even with the smell of sick clinging to me, my raw sexual aura had shone through, and now rogue sheikhs and warlords were in the other room trying to outbid one another for me. To save myself, I'd need to somehow dampen my agreeable nature during auction.

Voices sounded out in the hallway, hushed tones I strained to hear. I tried to sit up and then groaned at the effort. They'd likely already put something in my system, possibly via poison dart on the train. I wasn't tied down or anything, so they'd have taken chemical precautions to ensure I didn't run away.

When two men rushed into the room, I pushed myself back against the wall and held my hands out to stop them from getting any closer.

"I don't know how much you've paid for this—millions, I'm sure—but my family is very wealthy, and they'll double it for my freedom."

It was true: my family was from old English money, the kind that seems to grow no matter how much you spend.

The two traffickers glanced between each other, confused, and I sighed. Of course, they wouldn't understand English well.

I leaned closer and spoke very slowly with dramatic gestures. "You haaaavvve to let meee gooooooo."

The shorter one propped his hands on his hips and turned to his friend. "What is she going on about? And why is she speaking as though we're mentally ill?"

I clapped, excited. "Oh good, you speak English! That should make the whole ransoming bit much easier. Shouldn't you two be busy cutting letters out of magazines?"

The taller bloke in the baseball cap bit down to conceal a smile. "She thinks we've kidnapped her, Massimo."

Massimo blanched and whipped his head back to me. "No! No, you passed out in the square outside. In Vernazza. We carried you in here because everyone was gawking and..."

It took a bit more information before the pieces of my day started to settle back into place. The sick feeling on the train, how lightheaded I'd felt as I'd tried to maneuver my way down to the village square. At some point I'd blacked out, and now I was there, in a dusty room with two Italian men. Now that I was fairly confident they weren't sex traffickers, I let myself mull over their features. They were very handsome, especially the taller one. I didn't know his name yet, but I kept slipping quick glances his way as Massimo chattered on about my passing out and how I could have died, yada yada. He lingered in the door of the room, happy to let Massimo take the lead, but I wanted him to step closer and introduce himself, peel the cap off his head so I could see his face properly. From what I could see beneath it, he was beautiful. Golden from the Italian sun. Tall and muscled beneath his rolled long-sleeve shirt and jeans. I scanned higher, up to his defined jaw. He was studying me just as intently as I was studying him, and instead of looking away when our eyes locked beneath the brim of his cap, I smiled.

I was in Italy to find love, after all. How convenient that this romantic-looking man, out of every man in the village,

had been the one to rescue me.

“Are you feeling okay now? Should I call the doctor?” Massimo asked, stepping in front of his friend and cutting off our intense staring contest. I nearly shifted my head around him, but he was being kind and I didn’t want to snub my nose at his hospitality.

“Honestly, I think I just need a few hours of sleep. I’ve had a rough day and I’m still a bit dizzy from travel.”

Massimo nodded. “Right, well—”

“What is this place?” I cut in, glancing around the room. Sure, it was dusty, but the bones of the room were nice. The window, though boarded up, was large, and beneath the layer of dirt, I could just barely make out pastel yellow paint on the walls. It reminded me of sunflowers.

I’d wanted the tall one to answer, but Massimo replied first. “It’s an old bed and breakfast. Our grandmother took care of it when she was alive.”

I grinned. “Perfect. I’d like to rent a room here, please.”

The man leaning against the door jamb laughed. “In case you hadn’t noticed, the place isn’t exactly operational.”

His voice shook me. There were layers of depth there, a proper English accent at its base with a rich Italian layer up top. I suspected he’d spent a good deal of time both in England and Italy.

Massimo turned back and addressed his friend in rapid-fire Italian. I ached to cut in and ask him to translate, but I held my tongue until they were finished.

Finally, he glanced back to me and clapped his hands as if the situation was settled. “There’s a place across the square. They should have a room available.”

I nodded, though a part of me wanted to struggle, to insist on staying in the dark room. There was something wonderful about it, the history of its walls, the mysteries that filled the boxes stacked in the corner.

“Are you okay to walk?” Massimo asked with a worried expression.

Truthfully, I still felt terrible, but I didn’t want to take up any more of their time. I’d force my dizziness aside and let them lead me across the square. As soon as I made it to my room, I could crash.

With the promise of sleep on the horizon, I leaned forward and dropped my feet to the ground, testing the waters. I still felt ill, but not nearly as close to passing out as I had earlier. I put my weight into my feet and was about to stand from the bed when the man from the doorway stepped forward and gripped my forearm to steady me.

I stilled for the briefest of moments, shocked by his touch. It was warm and unwavering. He wasn’t worried that he’d overstepped his bounds, not like English blokes would have been, teetering in their boots with shaky, nervous voices. This man had rushed forward to help me with a pragmatism that showed he wasn’t just a gentleman when told to be.

“Steady,” he said, helping lead me through the doorway of the room. He reached for my backpack with his other hand and slung it over his shoulder like it was filled with cotton candy. Massimo reached for my suitcase, turned down my offer of help, and then the three of us headed back out the door toward the square. I glanced behind me one last time, saying goodbye to the old, abandoned bed and breakfast before Massimo locked the door behind us.

“I’m Georgie by the way,” I said, chancing a quick glance up to the man whose grip was still around my forearm.

He offered a curt nod and continued to lead me across the square.

When it was clear he wasn’t going to offer up his name on his own, I asked.

“And what are you called?”

“Gianluca.”

The name slipped off his tongue so beautifully, I nearly asked him to say it once more, just so I could listen to his

accent.

“But his friends call him Luca,” Massimo filled in, rushing forward to catch up to us.

Luca. I rolled the name around my head, testing it on his tall frame. It fit perfectly.

The door to my room was barely locked before I lunged for the twin bed and collapsed on top of the sheets. I’d meant to rest there for only a moment before getting up to wash, but my body had other plans. A short nap turned into the longest, deepest sleep of my life. I didn’t wake until the following morning, disoriented and so hungry I was nearly delirious. It’d been over twenty-four hours since I’d had a meal.

I blinked my eyes open, rolled to sit up, and waited for the dizziness to overtake me again.

It didn’t.

Which meant it was time to show Vernazza my good side—that is, the one not covered in vomit.

I threw off my soiled clothes from the day before and hopped into the shower. My room was barely more than a broom cupboard, but it was cheap. Plus, the woman who’d checked me in the day before had promised I could stay as long as I wanted, though I suspected she’d have said anything to elicit a smile from Gianluca. Itoweled off and inspected my surroundings. There was the small bed, the sheets still mostly in place despite my having collapsed right on top of them, and a small wicker chair resting in the corner of the room. The plaster walls were painted a light blue and a small painting of the choppy sea hung on the wall over the bed.

I turned to the door, where Massimo and Gianluca had dropped my luggage the day before. They’d ensured I made it to my room all right and then they’d nearly sprinted away, no promise of meeting up or seeing me again. Oh god, who’d blame them. I’d accused them of kidnapping me! It was all a bit depressing. Gianluca was one of the most handsome men I’d ever met and I hadn’t even properly seen him, not with the

cap on. In all likelihood, I probably wouldn't get another chance. He'd seen me at my absolute worst, bits of dried throw-up and all.

I sighed and dragged my suitcase across the floor, deciding to forget about my embarrassing arrival. Sure, it would have been lovely if Gianluca had insisted on staying the night and nursing me back to health (with his mouth), but there would be other men in Italy, other deliciously handsome men—I was sure of it.

I propped my suitcase open on the wicker chair and started to flip through my clothes. It was early summer in Italy, chilly in the mornings and evenings but warm and sunny in the afternoons. I rummaged around for a simple white sundress and was about to drop my towel when a loud gothic bell rang out in the square behind me, reminding me where I was.

Vernazza.

I grinned and flew to the window, flinging it open with enough gusto that the shutters slapped against the plaster walls inside my room. It punched me right in the gut, the beauty of the place. The main square was surrounded on three sides by pastel buildings: small hotels, rooms, apartments, restaurants stacked up three or four stories high on the mountainside. They were all varying shades of pink and light red, yellow and green, cast in early morning light. The sun had barely begun to rise over the terraced hills surrounding the small village. The sea air swelled past the window, blooming goosebumps across my exposed shoulders. I clutched my towel around my middle and leaned out, glancing to the left and inhaling the harbor and sea that lined the village on the fourth side. It was just as spectacular as the view from the train: turquoise water and bright blue skies stretched out to infinity.

The church bells rang seven times in total, a beautiful sound that I mourned after they'd finished, but then I remembered that they'd only just begun. The day was young. I left the windows open, enjoying the cool breeze as I dressed for the day. I didn't bother fixing myself up. After a day of suffering, I wanted to get out and explore. Besides, my

stomach was grumbling so loud I feared I would wake up the other guests staying in the building.

I flung on a pair of leather sandals, stuffed the small room key in my purse, and set off down the narrow staircase. The woman who'd checked me in the day before was already set up behind the counter on the ground floor. She glanced up and smiled when she saw me approach.

"Feeling better?" she asked with a thick Italian accent.

I nodded. "Yeah, sorry about all the drama yesterday. I didn't plan on arriving so close to death."

She laughed and stood up, reaching across the counter with her hand. "It's..." She paused for a moment, trying to find the right English word. "Normal?"

I nodded. "Ah, well that's reassuring."

"I'm Chiara."

I grinned. "Georgie."

She was younger than I'd thought at first, about my age or maybe a year or two older. Her long hair was darker than mine, nearly black, and her eyes almost matched.

"Are you having breakfast now?" she asked.

"Yeah." I smoothed a hand against my stomach. "I'm starved."

"There is a place," she said, turning and pointing through the front door of the hotel. "Just up the road. The Blue Marlin. Tell Antonio that Chiara sent you."

My stomach grumbled loudly then, as if wanting to answer her itself. Chiara laughed and waved me off, promising to see me when I returned to my room later.

I stepped out of the hotel and my sandals clapped against the stone walkway. I'd been in the square the day before, but this felt massively different. Then, not only had I been sick and disoriented, I'd arrived in the middle of the day when the square was crowded with tourists. Now, as I stepped away from the hotel and stood on the perimeter of the square, I felt

like I was seeing a new side of Vernazza, a secret, quiet side. The tables and umbrellas used for the square's restaurants were closed and pushed to the side, stored up until they needed them for lunch service later in the day.

An old man with thinning white hair swept out a doorway, nodding to me as I passed. Boats bobbed in the harbor, and this early, there were no children splashing in the water, no teenagers sunbathing on the large rocks. A few extra boats sat in the center of the square, stored with thin cloth covers over the top of them. I passed a sleepy cat relaxing in the center of one and it coaxed me closer with a few cheeky meows. It was fat and happy, most likely the result of daily scraps from pliable tourists.

What a lovely life, I thought, petting under its chin before my stomach reminded me for the twentieth time that I was nearing death if I didn't feed myself soon. I turned from the cat, resisting its meows of protest, and turned in the direction of The Blue Marlin.

There was only one main street in Vernazza, the Via Roma. It wound straight from the village square up to the train station and the narrow lane was mostly meant for foot traffic, but that morning, a few motorized carts ran alongside me, making early morning deliveries. I walked along the side of the road, inspecting the shops as I passed them. They weren't open yet, but I peered through the windows, admiring the things inside. Most had kitschy trinkets and cheap t-shirts, of course, but a few of them stocked specialty handmade pastas and local olive oil, bottled pesto and lemon candies. I memorized the name of one I wanted to visit later and continued my walk, all but salivating as I grew closer to The Blue Marlin and smelled the first sign of breakfast.

I dreamt of having a proper meal, one filled with croissants, sausage, and eggs. Oh, and toast and milky tea! When I strolled through the open door of the restaurant and saw the overflowing pastry case propped on the counter, I knew I wouldn't be disappointed.

"Buongiorno," greeted the man wiping down the top of the counter. He had lovely kind eyes rimmed by deep-set wrinkles.

I smiled and greeted him with a meek hello. My knowledge of the Italian language was abysmal, and even though I knew he'd just wished me good morning, I was too nervous to try the greeting on my own tongue. I didn't want to sound like a silly oaf.

"English?" he asked, taking my shyness to mean I hadn't understood him.

"Please," I said as I breathed out, relieved.

He chuckled and slid a menu across the bar. "We don't start serving eggs until 8:30 AM, but I can get you a coffee or pastry."

With that, he went back to work and gave me a few moments of peace to review the menu and peruse the pastry case. I was deciding between an almond croissant or a plain one when four older tourists strolled into the restaurant dressed in proper hiking gear. They had on hats, boots, and industrial-grade sunglasses, and they even had walking sticks folded up and stuffed into the side pockets of their small backpacks. They passed behind me and waved to the man behind the counter. Without a word, he started whipping up drinks for them, a ritual they all seemed comfortable with.

"I think we should take the train to Monterosso and then hike back from there," one of the American men said, addressing his group. "Everyone says that's the best view. It's the one you see on postcards."

"It's also the hardest trek though," one of the women warned.

"Then we should do it while it's cool out."

The four of them were working out whether or not it was a good idea when I stepped forward and cut in.

"You can hike between the villages?"

Four pair of eyes sliced over to me.

"Of course!" one replied, seemingly shocked by my question.

"You must! It's what Cinque Terre is known for!"

Really?

The man behind the counter chuckled as he slid four espressos across to the Americans.

“There are trails that connect all five villages,” one of the women continued.

“I thought you could only go by train.”

They shook their heads adamantly, nearly jumping over one another to correct me.

“No!”

“The trails are wonderful, and a few of them are really simple, just leisure walks along the coast.”

“You can take a boat between the villages too, like water taxis.”

Huh, crazy. Clearly, you were supposed to research a place before hopping on a plane, but things were working out for me. It was only my first morning and I was already learning.

“What’ll you have?” the man behind the counter asked, bringing my attention back to breakfast. The most important subject of all.

I ordered tea and an almond croissant, and the Americans suggested I join them outside. I didn’t hesitate. Sure, they were older than my gran, but they seemed to know what they were doing. I could gobble up my flaky croissant and learn more about where I planned on spending my summer.

We picked a spot out front on the small patio and they unloaded all these brilliant maps, flopping them on the table and pointing out which trails were best and which ones were better left for the real sporty types.

I was fit, but I didn’t really fancy a trek to Everest or anything. They suggested I start with a simple route and then they slid the maps toward me.

“Keep them. We have extra.”

I thanked them loads and stuffed the maps into my purse. They were standing, ready to set off for their hike, when I

caught sight of a man in a ball cap walking up the main path toward the train station.

Gianluca.

He was alone, keeping his head down as he walked. My heart sped up, watching him approach. A part of me had assumed I'd never see him again, and now here he was, less than a day later!

He took long, confident strides up the road, keeping his hands stuffed in his pockets. I couldn't see his face with his head down like that, and I willed him to glance up and see me so I wouldn't have to call his name. What would I call him anyway? Luca was what his friends called him, and after our short meeting—where I'd acted like a nutter on her deathbed—I had no misconceptions that we were at that level.

I opened my mouth, prepared to call out to him, to say something, anything, when a man farther up on the road caught his attention first.

“Buongiorno Luca!”

He whipped his head up and broke out into a devastating smile, all even white teeth and deep dimples. My heart sputtered to a stop. God, he was romantic looking, the sort of man who breathes passion into life without even trying.

“Good looking, huh?”

One of the American women nudged me with her elbow and nodded to Gianluca.

I nodded, trying to ignore how shaky I felt.

“He's the kind of handsome you don't see all that often,” her friend chimed in. “You're safer staying away from Italian men like that, Georgie.”

Maybe she was right.

Maybe I should have kept my distance.

But I didn't.

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