

The story of her future may have already been written in the past....

# Next to Never

*New York Times* Bestselling Author of *Aflame*

**PENELOPE DOUGLAS**

Also by Penelope Douglas

*The Fall Away Series*

*Bully*

*Until You*

*Rival*

*Falling Away*

*Aflame (digital novella)*

*Misconduct*

# **Next to Never**

*A Fall Away Novella*

**Penelope Douglas**

INTERMIX

New York

INTERMIX

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Version\_1

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*To Johanna and Debbie*  
*who said I couldn't sit with them at lunch . . .*  
*\*waves\**

## **Playlist**

“Breaking the Habit” by Linkin Park

“Comedown” by Bush

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“It’s Been Awhile” by Staind

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“Remedy” by Seether

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“Cradle of Love” by Billy Idol

“Stronger” by Through Fire



## **Note from the Author**

This novella is a continuation of the Fall Away series. It is strongly recommended that you have read the series prior to reading this book—or, at the very least, *Bully* and *Aflame*.

Series Order:

Bully

Until You

Rival

Falling Away

Aflame

Next to Never

Please note, this novella is told from Quinn's (introduced in *Aflame*) point of view, but it is not her story. She will have a full-length novel eventually. If, for any reason, you need a family tree during the reading process, you may find it here: [pinterest.com/pin/515310382345153154/](https://pinterest.com/pin/515310382345153154/) (special thanks to Amelie Leroy).

# Chapter 1

“Move it, Quinn!” I hear Jax bellow, clapping his hands.  
“Come on!”

I race between two other players, shuffling the soccer ball between my feet and feeling my black and orange jersey sticking to my back.

*I love soccer. I love soccer. I love soccer.*

No, I don't. I hate soccer. I'm thrilled it's the end of my senior year, and this is my last game.

“Over here!” I spot Maya Velasquez out of the corner of my eye, calling to me.

I swing back my right foot and shoot the ball over to her just as I see someone dive into my space.

“Suck dirt, Caruthers.” And then all I see is a green jersey crashing into me and shoving me to the ground.

“Ugh,” I growl, wincing.

*Damn it!* A silvery ache shoots through my ass and my back as I peer up, squinting against the sunlight. Simone Feldman, from the Weston team, smirks down at me with a gloating expression in her green eyes.

But then, much to my enjoyment, someone knocks into her, making her stumble. She falters, but she doesn't fall, and I laugh, seeing her knocked off her high pedestal. *Thank you, Dylan.*

I glance to the left and see exactly who I expected to see. Dylan, my brother Jared's daughter, who's only two years younger and on the same team as me, runs backward, toward the goal, grinning at me.

Simone and everyone else move on, leaving me behind, too.

“Get up, Quinn!”

I hood my eyes and groan, recognizing the voice behind me. Standing up, I spin around to see Madoc as he tosses his black suit jacket on a bleacher and loosens his light blue tie. He must've rushed here after work to see the game.

“Shake it off!” he orders, clapping his hands like Jax. “Let's go!”

I roll my eyes and turn back around, powering on. There are a million other things I'd rather be doing—journaling, cooking, swimming . . . homework, laundry, getting a cavity filled—but Madoc, Jax, and my dad, for that matter love having their kids in sports. For my brothers, it's exercise and good, clean fun. For my father, it's trophies on a wall and another extracurricular for my college resumes.

Not that I need soccer anymore, anyway. My admission to Notre Dame next fall is secure.

“So.” Madoc comes up after our win, hooks an arm around my neck, and plants a kiss on the top of my head. “I had this great idea where you could maybe intern with my campaign over the summer.”

“You mean you had this great idea where you could get free, easy labor.”

I hear him *tsk* like that's sooooo not what he was thinking, but I know Madoc. He's my most fun-loving brother, he's easy to talk to, and I always feel most at ease around him, but he's also used to getting anything and everything he wants.

And while I'm sure he wouldn't mind paying someone to work with his campaign, he can bend me and boss me around a lot easier than someone he barely knows.

“Come on,” he says, trying to work me already. “You're polite, well-spoken, and you follow directions. Plus you're family. I won't get accused of getting kinky with an intern.”

I snort, despite myself. He can always make me laugh.

But I tell him, “I have other plans. Ones that are far more fun than sitting in a cubicle all summer and cold-calling

voters, begging them to make you mayor.”

“Plans? Like what?”

I shrug and pull out my ponytail and elastic headband. “I thought of traveling.”

I don’t look at him, but it takes him a moment to respond.

“Why haven’t I heard about this until now?” he asks.

*Because I haven’t made definite plans. Because I haven’t told anyone. Because I have no idea where I want to go or what I want to see.*

*Because Dad will never let me go.*

“Have you talked to Dad about it?” he asks.

I stuff my towel and hair ties back into my backpack, ignoring him.

“Quinn, as much as I’d love to see you spread your wings, there’s no way he’s going to allow it.” He hands me my water bottle. “You know you need months to prepare him for something like that, and he would never let you go alone.” And then he adds, his tone turning clipped, “And if he did, I wouldn’t. Besides, I thought you both decided you’d take the summer and get ahead with some courses at Clarke before going off to Notre Dame in the fall.”

*Jesus.*

I keep my expression impassive, trying not to look annoyed. In a few months, I really will be gone, and then I’ll miss Madoc—and everyone else—so I’m trying not to act like a brat.

I swing the backpack strap over my shoulder. “Yeah, I know. Forget I said it. It’s just something I was tossing around.” I roll my eyes at him, turning it into a joke with a smirk. “I guess I’ll try to wait until after college to start living my life.”

“Atta girl.” He gives me a light punch on the arm, grinning. “Besides, you know Jared has events lined up all

summer, and with Pasha busy setting up the production line in Toronto, who's going to handle his scheduling? And then Jax and Juliet will need your special touch up at the summer camp for the planning of the fireworks show on the Fourth, and—”

“And yada yada yada . . . I know!” I grumble. “I can't be replaced. No one else can do what I do, right?!”

“Of course not, Quinn-for-the-Win. We need you.”

I shake my head and walk around him, heading for the locker room.

God, I love him. I love all of my family. But each one of them knows how to manipulate me.

None of them would tell me to go. No one will say “Just do it!” or “What do *you* want to do for your summer, Quinn?”

Jax and Jared assume I'm fine. Madoc wants all of his family around him all of the time. My nieces and nephews are too caught up in their own lives to care what I'm doing, and my parents . . . well, they want me happy. But they don't want me to make any mistakes, either. Hell, a two-day sex talk preceded my very first date.

But I'm their baby. Their second chance.

Not that there was anything wrong with my brothers. They turned out well. But I gather my parents didn't have much to do with that, either.

No one knows what I want. No one looks closely enough.

No one except Lucas.

After my shower, I quickly dress in some jean short cut-offs and a gray V-neck and dry my hair. I unclasp the strap of my backpack and slide off Lucas's baseball cap that he gave me before he left town three years ago. I always carry it with me.

Three whole years, and I haven't seen or talked to him. After grad school, he moved to New York for a job, but his architectural firm had him assigned to a project in Dubai. He's

been living in the Middle East, for the most part, since he left Shelburne Falls. It doesn't feel like he is ever coming back.

I know he isn't technically part of our family, but Madoc had mentored him since he was eight, and he's been a part of my life since I was born.

After he left, I sat down a few times to write him—letters, e-mails, Facebook messages—but something always held me back from sending them. Like maybe I was afraid he wouldn't write back.

Maybe, just maybe, he tolerated annoying little Quinn Caruthers and all of her stupid questions while he was stuck here, but now he doesn't have to anymore. Why should he even bother, right? I don't fit into his life anymore. He's twenty-nine now. Important, busy, sophisticated . . .

And he hasn't written me, either, so . . .

Pulling the light blue Cubs cap down over my eyes to shield the sun, I start the walk to the bike rack in front of the school.

"You know, I still can't believe that you don't have a car!" someone shouts behind me as I unlock my bike. "It's like a *thing* in our family, Quinn!"

I laugh to myself, recognizing Dylan's tone. Yes, car-love definitely runs in our family. So much so that one of my brothers—her father—owns a company that designs and engineers performance automotive parts, while another brother runs the town's racetrack.

Looking over my shoulder, I see her pull up in her dad's old Mustang Boss 302—which he gave her when he bought his brand new Shelby.

She grins at me through the open driver's side window.

"Outdoor air pollution is one of the top ten killers on Earth," I tell her, unwinding the lock from the bars. "Thousands of people in this country die every year due to air pollution, and the best way to decrease it is by walking or

riding a bicycle.” I smile, trying to look smug, and stuff the lock into my backpack. “I’m just doing my part.”

“Can you do mine, too?” Kade, my nephew, strolls up and throws his duffel bag into the bed of his truck, chuckling to himself.

“And mine,” his twin, Hunter, says, doing the same. They both must’ve just gotten done with their workouts in the school’s weight room. Bulking up for the junior year football season in the fall.

I twist my lips to the side, disgusted at the gas-guzzling penis-enhancer Madoc bought his sons that won’t make their manly areas any bigger despite what teenage boys like to think. He purchased the big black truck for them in hopes they’d learn to share—and be forced to go places together since they fought a lot.

The pollutants from it are probably strong enough to kill cockroaches . . . underground . . . in Antarctica.

Actually, I’m not *that* concerned with pollution. I just enjoy riding a bike, because it’s something where I don’t fall in line with the rest of my family, and it gives me an excuse to take longer to get home. More me-time and all that.

Dylan smiles at me, a gentle look in her blue eyes. “I’ll see you tonight, okay?”

I nod and slip my backpack on my back. Pulling out my bike, I hear Kade and Hunter’s truck fire up behind me, and they, along with Dylan, charge out of the school parking lot, mostly empty now since school ended two hours ago.

Climbing on my bike, I push off and pedal out of the parking lot, inhaling the fresh scent of lilacs that carries on the light wind around the school.

I love this time of day, right before parents get off work but after school lets out. The streets are quiet, and the sun is falling to the west. It’s warm, but it’s not beating down on my shoulders and neck like it does during midday. Glimmers of yellow peek through the cluster of leaves overhead, and I

speed down streets lined with cars, hearing kids in their Rollerblades playing hockey in a driveway.

Since it's Friday night, I don't have to worry about rushing home to do my schoolwork or study. It's nearly the end of the year, after all. Final papers and projects have already been turned in, final exams are scheduled, and graduation practice is in full swing. I'm in the homestretch.

It's also Dylan's big night. In addition to just getting her license and her father's old car a few months ago, she'll be making her debut at the track tonight. I have to be there.

But first . . . I cruise around a corner and keep pedaling into the center of town. My hair blows behind me, and I love the feel of the wind in my clothes. I smile to myself, thinking about how the boys keep begging to get me a car, but wouldn't they just flip their lids if they knew I might actually be interested in a motorbike instead?

As I race up to High Street, I turn right and ease on the brake as I pull up next to the curb in front of a shop on the corner of Sutton and park my bike.

Standing and gazing through the old wooden French doors with chipped red paint, I see everything looks the same as it was yesterday when I came here. Cobwebs block my view, but I can make out the broken-down counter of the old café, the stools with cracked vinyl, the empty, dusty shelves, and a chair overturned on the floor with random bits of debris scattered around.

Stepping to the left of the door, I peer through the display window, its shelves also coated with a thick layer of dust.

I would take those shelves out. Potential customers want to see the inside of a store before they enter, so yeah . . . take out the shelves, so they can see what kind of place it is.

I chew my bottom lip, the excitement sending off a wave of butterflies in my stomach.

I'd also paint the outside brick a cream color, like a pastry, and then I'd paint the doors turquoise, my favorite color. It



would make it bright, like summer. Inviting, happy, quaint . . .

Perfect for a summer business.

I'd also add a few tables with umbrellas out front, a menu with not only pastries and baked goods, but also an assortment of refreshers and maybe some ice cream.

And I'd leave the doors open all day, so the neighborhood can smell the breads and sweets all the way down the street.

"Hey," I hear someone call to me.

I turn my head and see a guy come around from behind me. He's wearing jeans, a white T-shirt with writing on it, and he's young, probably about my age, but I've never seen him at my school.

"What's your name?" he asks, and I spot a group of guys standing down the sidewalk from where he came, talking and laughing.

I turn away, looking back at the old bakery. The For Lease sign in the window has a phone number with it. I'm not trying to be rude to him, but he doesn't get personal information about me simply because he thinks he's cute. Especially if I don't know him.

"You go to Falls High, right?"

I ignore him again, turning for my bike to go home.

But my cap is plucked off my head. I whip around, seeing him hold it high and away from me, grinning.

He waves the hat back and forth. "What do I have to do to get you to talk to me?"

"Asshole," I say. "There. I talked. Now give me the hat back."

But he just laughs.

I dart out my hand, trying to snatch it back. "Give it to me!"

That hat hasn't left my possession in four years. If I'm not wearing it, I'm carrying it on my backpack. Lucas will come home someday, and he'll want it back. My stomach starts to churn, thinking about how I can't lose it.

"It's kind of old and ratty, isn't it?" the guy, whose name I don't care to find out, comments. "I can take you to a Cubs game and get you a new one."

I shoot forward again, grabbing for the hat, but I just miss it as he pulls it away.

"You still didn't tell me your name," he chides, smiling like he just loves this little game of his.

I bare my teeth, breathing hard. Moving forward, I slam my palm into his chest, pushing him backward and making him stumble. Taking my chance, I reach out and grab the hat out of his hand.

He shakes with laughter and grins at me as I squeeze the cap in my fist.

But then his face falls and his eyes focus over my head. "Can I help you?" he asks, an annoyed tone to his voice.

A shadow falls over me, and I feel someone at my back. Twisting my head, I see Jared, my oldest brother, hovering over me and looking at Asswipe like he's just dying for the kid to give him a reason.

"Oh, no," I hear someone say. I look behind the guy and see another kid heading up to us. He swings an arm around the shoulder of the guy talking to us and pulls him back. "I'm sorry, Jared. He's new in town." He pulls the guy back until they both turn around and head away, the scared one mumbling something in the new kid's ear.

And then they're gone.

I sigh and twist around, facing Jared. "I handled it," I tell him. "You're really embarrassing sometimes."

He cocks an eyebrow. "The sister of the head of JT Racing driving a bicycle is embarrassing."

I growl under my breath and pull the hat down on my head again. *I'm not having this conversation.* Jared, Madoc, and Jax had just been waiting for me to turn sixteen, get my license, and pick out a car. They couldn't wait to work on it, make modifications, whatever . . .

They're still frothing at the mouth for me to change my mind.

"Do you want a ride home?" he asks. "I was heading there, anyway."

I glance at his pickup, parked at the curb, with his eight-year-old son, James, and Madoc's daughter, A.J., sitting in the backseat.

But I turn away. "I'm cool. Heading for the biker bar first," I say nonchalantly, climbing on my bike. "Maybe do some cocaine. Have unprotected sex."

"Wait!" he calls.

He heads for his truck, still idling. "This was sent to our house accidentally." He reaches through the passenger side window and pulls out a yellow package.

Stepping up, he tosses me the bubble mailer, and I catch it, instantly feeling something solid inside. Turning it over, I see that it's addressed to me, but the top left-hand corner is empty.

"There's no return address." I glance up, holding out the package to him. "You don't want to check it for anthrax first?"

He rolls his eyes at me and walks for the driver's side of his car, Seether's "Remedy" blasting from inside.

But I can see a hint of a smile under his scowl. "I'll see you tonight," he says. And then he jerks his eyes over to the sidewalk where the group of guys is loitering. "And you!" He points to the jerk that was hassling me. "There's two more of me in this town. Don't forget it!"

The guy instantly tenses and turns away, trying to act like Jared's not talking to him. I laugh to myself and stuff the package in my backpack.

Sometimes I hate how my brothers hover. And sometimes I love it.

• • •

After getting home and parking my bike in the garage, I head straight for the kitchen.

My dad is probably still in the city, and my mom is usually out running errands night and day now. Since Madoc is running for mayor, she'd enlisted herself as his event coordinator and is constantly meeting with venues, caterers, musicians . . .

This is the time of day I like best. No one is home, there's no pressure, and, for a little while, I'm relaxed.

Dropping my backpack on the kitchen counter, I grab a Fresca out of the refrigerator and jog upstairs to my bedroom. I want to get in the pool before someone shows up to distract me.

Slipping on my white bikini and grabbing a towel from the bathroom, I grab my backpack off the counter downstairs along with my drinks and carry everything through the doors leading onto the back patio.

The rush of the waterfall spilling over rocks as it cascades down into the pool immediately relaxes me, and a smile pulls at my lips. When my parents moved us back to Shelburne Falls from Chicago and decided to put in a pool, the waterfall was one of the things on my wish list. It reminded me of the trip to Yosemite our family took when I was eleven. Nearly everyone opted to stay at camp and swim or fish, but Jax, Lucas, and I hiked the Mist Trail, past two waterfalls.

I can still feel the cool spray hitting my arms and legs as we hiked the steps. I can still hear the thunder of the water and feel the force of it rushing past us. And the smell . . .

Evergreens, water, and earth. Like sunrise in a cave.

My dad knew how much I loved the trip and had the waterfall put in, even though I only mentioned it once. He

does so much to try to make me happy. And even though we still keep an apartment in Chicago, since my parents have to be there so much and it's easier than living out of a suitcase in a hotel room, I've rarely been back since moving here before freshman year. I'm not a city person.

Taking another sip of soda, I set my stuff down on one of the patio tables, feeling the late afternoon sun warm my shoulders. I dig in my backpack for my iPad, but then pause on the envelope Jared gave me.

I'd nearly forgotten. Pulling it out, I survey the front of the package again, seeing that it's addressed to me, but it was sent to Jared and Tate's. That's weird. I'd never used their address. And there's no return address, but the postmark reads Toronto. I eye it curiously. I don't know anyone in Canada.

As soon as I tear away the top of the package and peek inside, I'm hurrying to reach in and pull out the book the envelope contains.

A used book.

It's a hardcover with a tattered paper cover, the edges slightly torn and curling. Peeking back inside the envelope, I see that there's nothing else. No note. No business card. Nothing.

Setting the envelope down in confusion, I'm wondering who would send me an old book.

In search of clues, I fan the pages so that the scent of aged paper wafts into my nostrils. The book is in decent shape, but the edges of the pages are slightly tattered, and the spine is broken in.

Closing the book, I read the front cover. *Next to Never*. There's no author. That's strange.

Turning the book over, I scan the back cover, reading the synopsis.

And quickly stop, rolling my eyes. I toss the book back down onto the table.

Romance. While I'm intrigued by who would send me a random book, I don't care to waste my time.

Instead I walk to the edge of the pool, step in, slowly descending up to my calves, and then my thighs and waist. Pushing off, I dive beneath the surface, completely submerging myself as the cool rush of water soothes my body and caresses my scalp. I pop up through the surface, pushing my hair back, and then return to the edge of the pool, reaching up to grab the envelope again.

Toronto.

Pasha's in Toronto, I guess. But I'm not close with her, and I don't get the impression sappy chick novels are her thing. And I don't know anyone else there, so . . .

In fact, the only other person I know that lives outside of this state is Lucas. I highly doubt, though, he'd send me a romance novel. Especially when he hasn't kept in touch.

Tossing the envelope down, I reach up and grab my iPad, tapping my finger on the search bar and watching the cursor start blinking. My hands shake for a moment as I hesitate, but then I just start tapping away.

Lucas Evan Morrow.

The blue circle starts spinning, and my heart flips in my chest as my stomach starts to cave. I don't want to see search results, and the other part of me just wants them to pop up really quickly to get this over with.

I still have time. I can turn off the iPad right now, because the only thing better than knowing is wondering, right? I'm a curious girl, but what if I don't like what I find? I'd gone all this time without Googling him. I'm happier that way. What if he's gotten married? Is serious with someone? Has he turned into a jerk with male-pattern baldness and a beer belly? He's almost thirty now, so what's the point of obsessing—

And then . . . a flutter hits my belly as image after image starts to load onto the screen.

*Oh, God.*

I lick my lips, all of my questions fading away as I'm suddenly lost.

There he is.

There are images upon images. Him at meetings, grand openings, parties . . . some of them are official—Lucas shaking hands with other businessmen and foreign sheiks—and then, in some, it doesn't look like he even knows he's being photographed. Head bent down and that look of stern concentration in his brow that I remember so well.

He's beautiful. A sudden sob lodges in my throat but I catch it just in time.

I've missed him. I didn't realize how much until now, except now I understand why I've refrained from looking him up. It hurts too much.

I grew up with him, talked to him and saw him regularly, and, in all this time, he hasn't written or called or come home. He forgot about all of us, just like I'd told him he would.

No. I don't want to see his life that I'm not a part of.

But as I gaze into his eyes, like the blue of the Pacific ten minutes after sundown, I also realize it's something else, too. As my heart pounds, tears that I hold back stinging my eyes and every muscle in my chest tightening at the sight of him, I realize as I look at his gorgeous face that it's more than missing him.

It's longing.

His clothes have changed. He is almost always in a suit in nearly every picture, looking taller and older, with his tie tightened, and a flexed jaw like he's in a constant state of preparing for a confrontation.

Where's the guy with greasy hands who helped my brothers in the garage and taught me how to play in the dirt?

“Hey.”

I pop my head up, hearing a call behind me. Hawke comes through the doors from the kitchen, and I turn the iPad over, hiding the screen.

He throws a towel onto a lounge chair and walks up to the pool, pulling his shirt up and over his head.

“Turn around,” he warns.

I roll my eyes and do what he asks, knowing why. Behind me, I hear the shuffle of clothes as he strips off his shorts and shoes, getting naked, and pulls on swimming trunks, no doubt. Hawke is my nephew but we’re not related by blood. A fact he uses to test the lines in our family. We would never hook up, but he likes to remind me that we *can* if we want to. You know . . . “for practice.”

As soon as I hear the splash of water, I turn around and see his dark form gliding under the water toward me. He pops up, flipping back his hair, longer on the top, shaved on the sides, and his lip and eyebrow rings glimmer in the sunlight.

“Hi,” I say. “You weren’t at school today.”

“Had some stuff to do.”

He floats backward, and I can tell I’m not going to get any more information. Hawke skips school rarely, but lately, it’s getting more frequent.

But although I’m curious, I’m not really worried, either. He keeps his grades up and doesn’t seem to be getting into trouble. Hawke knows how to take care of himself. I just hope his mom doesn’t find out. She pushes education. A lot.

Growing up, it wasn’t “if we go to college,” it was “when we go to college.”

“Are you off-roading tonight?”

He stands back up, shaking his head as he walks toward me. “No, but I can if you want to come with me,” he teases. “I’ll let you drive.”

“I don’t know how to drive.”



He stalks closer, a playful look in his eyes. “It’s time you learned.” He puts his hands on the edge of the pool at my sides. “Enough fucking around. If you can’t practice on me, who can you practice on?”

I nearly laugh. “You mean practice *with* you?”

He shrugs. “Either or.” And then he grabs my iPad from behind me, flipping it over. “What are you looking at?”

“Nothing,” I burst out, suddenly on alert as I dart out to grab it.

But his eyebrows shoot up when he no doubt sees what’s still on the screen. His eyes fix on me, and a drop of water falls from his hair down the side of his face.

“Still?” he inquires.

My shoulders tense, my guard going up, and I snatch the iPad back, turning it off again.

“They would never let it happen,” he states.

His words loom around me like a cage, and I don’t need him to clarify. I know what he’s talking about.

My wonderment with Lucas at eight had turned into a crush by the time I was fourteen. And now, at seventeen, it still sits there, this small, constant flame in the back of my heart. Despite the distance, the loss of contact, him being twenty-nine years old and a full-grown man . . .

Oh, Jesus. Hawke is right.

Madoc *might* come to terms with it, as well as Tate and Juliet. But Jared, Jax, and my father?

They only see in black and white.

I force down the tightness in my throat and put the iPad away, turning around to Hawke.

“So . . . ,” I broach, changing the subject. “This ‘stuff’ you’re doing . . . is it illegal?”

He hoods his eyes. “That’s insulting.”

“But still . . . is it illegal?”

He splashes some water on me. “Forget it. I’m not telling you shit.”

“Why not?”

“Because one look from my dad and you crack.”

I laugh and splash him back. That’s probably true.

“What are you reading?” he inquires, reaching over me. I see him take the hardcover book off the table.

“Be careful!” I wince. “Your hands are wet.”

““What if you met your soul mate too late?”” He reads the back cover. ““Would you let them go or would you hurt the ones you loved and risk everything to be together?”” He stops, wrinkling his eyebrows to look down at me with mischief in his eyes. “Lucas is only like thirty. It’s not too late.”

“Shut up,” I bite out, trying to grab for the book.

But he holds it up, pushing my hands away as he continues to read.

““On a cold winter night, Jase sees a young girl in an empty parking lot, and he doesn’t know what to do first: get her name or get her into his bed.”” Hawke busts out laughing, shaking as he turns his eyes back on me. “What the hell is this crap?”

“Just . . .” I snatch the book and throw it back up on the table. “Stop being an asshole for five seconds. It’s none of your business.”

“Women are totally into porn. I knew it.”

His gloating smirk is pissing me off. “It’s not porn,” I tell him. “I don’t think it is, anyway. Someone sent it to me in the mail.”

“You don’t know who?”

“No.” I shake my head and lean back against the edge of the pool. “And there was no note, either.”

“Mysterious,” he mumbles and then looks over at me again, waggling his eyebrows. “Are you going to read it? See if he gets her into his bed?”

This is why he’s my least favorite relative. He’s constantly trying to bait me.

But he’s also the one I’m closest to. Hawke always thinks of himself last, and I admire that about him.

“You do know what happens when you get into a man’s bed, right?” he asks.

“More than what happens when a girl gets into your bed, I hear.”

He chuckles. “Don’t test me, Quinn. Remember that we’re not actually related.”

I look over at him again, seeing his cocky smile, while his hands dance back and forth underneath the water.

“Oh, and what are you going to do?” I retort. “Convulse on top of me for fifteen seconds and then fall asleep?”

He lunges for me, and I squeal as he wraps his arms around me and picks me up off my feet.

“No!” I scream, but my stomach flips, and I’m laughing anyway.

He tosses me a couple feet, and then I’m free-falling.

My laugh follows me under the water.

Yep, definitely my least favorite relative.

## Chapter 2

With a few hours left until Dylan's race after I've showered and dressed, I figure I can kill some time, trying out the new strawberry tart recipe I found online yesterday. My parents will be home late and probably hungry.

"Dude," I hear as I open the door. "Have you started reading this?"

I pop my head up to see Dylan lying on my bed with the hardcover I got in the mail today.

I laugh to myself. "No. Romance isn't my thing."

"Not your thing? Who doesn't like love stories?"

I toss my towel down and gaze over at her. She's so different than me. Snarky, fun-loving, up for anything . . .

"If you want to read it, go ahead."

There's silence as I stand at my dresser and dig in my makeup bag, starting to pick out what I need.

"Happiness is a direction, not a place."

What?

I spin around. "What did you say?"

She raises her eyes. "You told me I could read it."

Yeah, not out loud. But that line . . . I know that line.

"That's a sentence in the book?" I go over to her to take a look.

Sure enough, it's the first sentence. Weird. That same quote is inscribed on a gold compass my mom gave me when I was twelve.

A compass I gave Lucas the last time I saw him, in exchange for his hat. I thought it would ensure he'd come back to return it. It hasn't.

And I don't think it's mere coincidence that a mysterious book from a mysterious sender containing a quote I'm familiar with has found me.

"Do you want me to read more?" Dylan asks.

No, not really. But I can't help but feel a little curious now.

I shrug and walk to my dresser again. "Just a little more, sure."

• • •

*Jase . . .*

Happiness is a direction, not a place. Or so they said.

I fucking hated that saying. Like I wouldn't be happier anywhere else but here right now.

I ran my fingers through my short blond hair, smoothing away the mess the wind had made, and skirted around a couple at a high round table as I made my way to my father's nook in the back. It was dark, secluded, and quiet, but it allowed him an excellent view of the action. And my father liked to see everything.

"The one thing I can count on about you"—he smiled like he'd swallowed something bad—"is that you can't be counted on."

"Where you're concerned?" I replied lazily as I unbuttoned my jacket and slid into the semicircle booth without looking at him. "Of course not."

I dumped my keys on the table and gestured to the waitress who made eye contact. She knew what I drank. I was here every Friday night at six o'clock sharp for the weekly rundown with my father.

"You're right, Jase," he agreed. "I expect too much from you apparently."

His dry tone reeked of disappointment, but I didn't give a shit. At twenty-six I was already disillusioned enough to feel

sorry for my own infant kid. What kind of family did I bring him into?

“I was in court in Chicago,” I explained. “What would you have me tell them? That you want weekly reports on my sperm count, so you can have a busload of grandsons in hopes that one of them will make it to the White House someday?”

Sarcasm was something I hadn’t grown out of.

“Stop whining.” My father swirled his Jameson in his rocks glass. “Tell them that you have an important meeting.”

“I hate lying. You know that.”

I dug into my breast pocket and pulled out a silver cigarette case, taking one out and lighting it. Tossing my lighter down on the table, I focused straight ahead of me, knowing my father was watching me through the swirls of smoke.

He was weighing his words, deciding if it would be worth his energy to chide me.

I blew out the smoke, biting back the smile tugging at my mouth. The day I graduated from law school last spring was the day I stopped letting him push me around. I had my degree, and I had the upper hand. He needed me more than I needed him, so once I’d secured my future, I put my foot down.

He’d bullied me into taking up the law, which even though I found little enjoyment in it, I was actually adept in it, and my forced marriage to Maddie was already hanging on by a thread. She was as unhappy as I was, and our son was the glue.

As much as I loved her, it was only a matter of time.

The waitress set down my drink—GlenDronach, neat—and disappeared.

“How’s the kid?” my father asked.

I smiled, my son’s sweet face flashing in my head. “Perfect,” I replied. “He came out of the womb with a smile, and I don’t think he’s stopped since.”

“He’s strong.” My father nodded, eyeing me. “He needs brothers.”

“He needs a father,” I shot back, blowing out smoke and hating the dirt taste in my mouth.

“You know I hate smoking.”

“I know,” I replied. “Is there anything else you wanted to ask me tonight? Other than about my child?”

He sighed, probably annoyed that I wasn’t playing along. “And Madeline?” He leaned forward, his midnight blue suit a sharp contrast to the red booth. “How is she?”

“Fine.” I nodded, tapping off some ashes in the ashtray. “Probably busy redecorating. She already has the kid in mommy and me swimming and Gymboree.”

“She’s a good woman.” He leaned back, looking at me pointedly.

I fisted my fingers, accidentally snapping the cigarette in half. “You don’t have to tell me that. I know my wife better than you.”

Maddie was my best friend.

Or rather she used to be.

We grew up in the same circles, were thrown together at social functions growing up, and were even “encouraged” to attend the same university. Lucky for our parents we hit it off and always kept in touch when we were separated. She attended boarding school down south, while I attended military school, but we wrote and talked on the phone. She knew me, and I cared about her.

Unlucky for us was the knowledge that our parents had a plan. Arranged marriages are supposed to be a thing of the past, but they’re still very much alive and well, and it’s ruined the close relationship Maddie and I once shared.

The stress of forcing myself to make love to someone I didn’t think about like that was killing me. She was still trying,

but I'd shut down.

And it killed me to hurt her.

I could feel my father's judgmental eyes on me, and I hurriedly tucked my cigarettes and lighter back in my jacket, getting ready to leave. I couldn't do this tonight.

"Son," he started, "I love you—"

I let out a bitter laugh, cutting him off. "Don't even try. Unlike me, you're terrible at lying."

"And I do want you to be happy," he continued, ignoring my insult. "I know you and Maddie are having problems." He lowered his voice. "You're practically separated, sleeping on your office couch half the week or in spare bedrooms in your house."

How did he know that? *Damn it.*

"There are ways for a married man to find satisfaction outside of his home."

I shook my head before throwing back the rest of my drink. "You really are a piece of work, you know that?"

To my father, happiness was power. And taking anything you wanted was powerful. He had no boundaries, and no sense of right or wrong.

But I did.

I may not have been in love with my wife, but I did love her. I may not want to yank up her skirt and fuck like her like I couldn't live without her, but I did care about her. We hadn't had sex in months, and even though I knew things were ending between us, I wanted to protect her and respect her.

I let out a breath and slid out of the booth, standing up and grabbing my phone and keys.

"This marriage cannot fail." My father leaned forward, issuing his order. "You're getting more and more distant by the day, and you need to keep it together. You'd be surprised how easily another woman can—"



“Another woman,” I growled, cutting him off, “isn’t going to fix what’s missing.”

“I know what’s missing,” he retorted, looking me up and down. “You have no lust for anything. Every day is the same. You already feel like you’re sixty years old, right?”

I froze, staring at him.

“Life is so dull”—he spoke slowly as if knowing every thought in my head—“even food seems boring, doesn’t it?”

My knuckles cracked, and the room felt like it was getting smaller.

He leaned back, eyeing me with his self-satisfied fucking face. “We keep a suite at the Waldorf, Jase. You’re not getting a divorce, so I suggest you use the room whenever and however often you need it.”

I shook my head and spun around, bolting out of the bar without even stopping to get my coat.

*Jesus Christ. What a fucking prick.*

The frigid March evening cut into me, but it was a welcome relief from my burning temper.

I powered down the sidewalk, my gaze driving over the concrete, and I couldn’t seem to get a handle on myself. I couldn’t make myself happy and keep my family intact. Why couldn’t I find a balance? Maddie wasn’t the problem. I was. Why didn’t I want her?

She knew I didn’t love her like that when we married, and it was the same for her, but we thought it would grow into something bigger.

I’d see her standing at the refrigerator in the mornings dressed in my white T-shirts, her long, beautiful legs and angelic face equal in their perfection. Any man would desire her. So why couldn’t I? Why couldn’t I slip my hands inside of her clothes and whisper in her ear how beautiful she was? Or how much I needed to be inside of her right then? Why couldn’t I give her the husband she deserved?

I rounded the corner, heading into the rear parking lot, lost in my thoughts, when I heard hushed chatter. I looked up and immediately halted.

My eyes narrowed at the sight of two kids hovering around my car, fiddling with the handle of my BMW.

*What the . . . ?*

“Hey!” I burst out, charging forward as both of their heads shot up. “Get away from my car!”

“Run!” one of the guys shouted, darting around the car and breaking into a run. “Come on, Kat!”

I raced over, seeing one of the kids shooting down to grab tools off the ground.

“Thomas!” he shouted after the other kid had already run off like a coward and saved himself.

But it was too late for this one.

These fucking kids were out of control, and I hoped like hell he was old enough to taste a night in jail.

“Come here, you little shit.” I swooped down and grabbed the kid by his black sweatshirt and yanked him up.

But my face immediately fell.

It wasn't a boy.

Not a boy at all.

It was a young woman.

She breathed hard, both fear and fight blazing in her chocolate eyes as I held her by the collar. I stared into the warmest brown hue I'd ever seen, and a glow of light sweat covered her flushed cheeks.

My mouth went dry.

Her long brown hair was tucked into the collar of her hoodie, but strands blew across her face with the light wind, and I squeezed her sweatshirt tighter.

“Let go of me, asshole!” she shouted, struggling and squirming to get away. I narrowed my eyes, amusement fluttering through my chest.

She twisted, throwing out her pathetic little fists, and I almost laughed.

I jerked her up. “How old are you? Didn’t your parents teach you to keep your hands off other people’s things?”

“Look, I’m sorry, okay?” she yelled, tears filling her eyes despite her tough act. “I promise we won’t do it again. We just needed the money.”

“Tell it to the cops,” I snapped, even though I had no intention of calling the police.

Her worried eyes darted around her, and I could tell she was struggling not to cry.

“How old are you?” I demanded again. Did she have parents responsible for her?

She shot angry eyes at me but clamped her mouth shut.

I got in her face. “How old?” I yelled.

But the next thing I knew, she’d swung her fist, bringing it down across the side of my face, and I reared back, loosening my grip on her.

*Shit!*

I grabbed my face, trying to force my stinging eye back open, but all I could make out were legs and ass as she darted away, into the night.

I squinted, rubbing the ache in my cheek, and I swallowed blood from where my teeth had cut the inside of my mouth when she’d hit me.

I composed myself and moved toward my car. But then I zeroed in on something on the ground, and I reached down to pick it up.

A wallet.

It had to be hers. Fake red leather with a coin compartment. Opening it up, I immediately went for her license and picked it out.

“Kat,” I said slowly, eyeing her bright smile and dark eyes.

And then I looked at her birthdate, since she’d refused to tell me.

Nineteen.

A smile tugged at the corner of my lips. “Old enough to know better,” I said to myself.

The address read “14 Truman Street,” and I turned the card around in my fingers, thinking about what to do.

I could have them arrested. Or I could save myself some aggravation, because they were only common street punks, and toss the license into the Dumpster. I had better things to do. Who really cared, anyway?

But then her eyes flashed in my head, and I suddenly knew what I wanted to do. My interest was piqued. The fear and the way her breathing shook. The vulnerable tremble to her bottom lip. The anger and the way she slapped me as she found the courage to fight.

What was her story?

Slipping the card into my pocket, I climbed into my car and sped out of the parking lot. Truman Street was on the other side of town, and I had no clue if she and her little pal even had transportation or they were just counting on taking mine, but I suspected I wouldn’t even find her home. If that was her real home, that is.

I sped down the street and took a left on Main, cutting through the downtown and driving until the businesses and pedestrians were behind me. I couldn’t see everything as clearly at night, but I could tell that the manicured lawns of emerald green had now turned brown and patchy, and the houses became smaller and older as the neighborhoods changed. The once-white siding of a trailer was tinged yellow

under the porch light, and I couldn't help but feel disgust at the garbage lying on some of the lawns.

After a few minutes, I finally pulled up on Truman Street and slowed my car, seeing number fourteen across the street. The house was dark with no lights illuminating the outside.

I gazed around the neighborhood, picturing my son inside one of these trailers or dilapidated houses. There was no way in hell.

"We could've been arrested!" I heard a woman shout.

I followed the voice and saw a girl across from number fourteen, leaving a trailer and carrying a small child. She chased after a man walking away from her.

It was them.

She adjusted the child on her hip, holding the poor kid close, since he didn't have a jacket. It looked as if they were picking him up at someone else's house.

"What would've happened to our kid?" she shouted after the guy, the father, I presumed.

He crossed the street, heading to number fourteen, and she trailed behind, carrying the child. He opened the door and disappeared inside, leaving her out there alone.

What a fucking prick. She was just a kid.

And the kid had a kid. I couldn't have her arrested.

Taking out my cell phone, I dialed a number and held the phone to my ear, waiting for him to answer like he always did.

"Hi. It's Jase," I informed him when he picked up. "I need all the information you can find on the residents of Fourteen Truman Street."

"Okay," Brown answered, and I knew he was probably writing the address down. He was on the company payroll, and an investigator my father's firm used often. "I'll get back to you within forty-eight hours."

“Twelve.” And I hung up.

• • •

Dylan stops reading there, but I can see her eyes move across the page as she silently reads.

“Hey,” I complain. *I was listening to that.*

I walk over and throw myself onto the bed, landing on my stomach next to her. Dylan turns to me, cocking an eyebrow.

“She tried to steal his car,” I explain, “and now he knows exactly where she lives. You can’t just stop there.”

We hover close, both of us reading to ourselves.

\*\*\*

*Jase . . .*

A week later, I walked into Denton Auto Repair, a piece-of-shit shack probably built in the thirties with chipped white paint and a dank cement floor in the “lobby.” The walls were stained yellow, probably from old cigarette smoke, the blue counter was cracked, and the two vinyl couches were ripped. I held back my sneer, trusting in the fact that the place had been in business a long time. It probably had a good reputation.

But under normal circumstances I would never step foot in such a grimy shithole whose mechanics would probably take my car out for a joyride after they talked me into leaving it overnight. I had other business here, though.

I closed the door behind me, the sun setting outside and evening approaching, and pulled out my handkerchief, absently wiping off my hand before stuffing it back into my pocket.

Two men loitered around the lobby, and when I looked to the front counter, I found it empty. This was where she was supposed to work. I’m not sure what she did, though. Clean, maybe?

“Mr. Hutcherson,” a female voice called, and I jerked my head to the left.

A young woman strolled behind the counter, coming in through the door leading in from the garage area, and heat immediately warmed my chest. I watched as she stapled paperwork and offered the man who'd stepped up to her counter a smile.

Jesus.

Her dark brown hair shone, tied up in a messy ponytail, and I caught hints of red in the strands around her oval-shaped face that I hadn't noticed last week. Her chocolate eyes were deep and warm, and I swallowed the lump in my throat, staring at her full bottom lip.

I clenched my fists at my sides, and tried to breathe normally, like I didn't want to walk right over there and . . .

She wore jean shorts that weren't too tight but just short enough to see a good amount of thigh, with a white V-neck T-shirt tucked into them that kind of drowned her. Did it belong to her boyfriend?

I walked slowly forward, as if on autopilot, and stepped into line behind the other man, Hutcherson, I would assume, to await my turn. She smiled at him and handed him his keys as he paid the bill. I noticed she had a grease stain on her neck as well as a few black smudges on her shirt and several on her hands. She must've worked on cars, too.

It was dark that night, and I didn't get a good look at her then, but seeing her again, I knew . . . it wasn't the adrenaline that night or the cold weather or the frustrated state I'd been in after fighting with my father.

I didn't want to punish her. Or help her. I'd wanted to see her again, yet I shouldn't have come. But my family was out of town, and I'd told myself it was just curiosity. That's all it was.

*You'd be surprised how another woman can . . .* Can what, Dad? Can tempt me like this? Can distract me from everything I hate in my life and make me feel alive again? For just a few minutes?

It was a bitter fucking pill to swallow that he might've been right. Everything had become paint-by-numbers in my life, and for the first time in a long time, the lines were blurred. I felt like I could stretch out my arms and not run into a boundary.

And for the first time ever, I felt dangerous to someone. I liked it.

“Can I help you, sir?”

A male voice to my left spoke up, and I turned my head. It was a young guy with red hair and a dark blue mechanic's shirt. His name patch read “Josh.”

“Yes. I'd like you to pull my car into the garage.” I reached into my pocket and pulled out my keys, handing them over. “I've only been waiting forever.”

My tone was curt, but only because I knew it would fluster him and send him on his way. I was dealing with the girl, not him.

“Uh . . . ,” he stammered, wide eyed, but I wasn't interested in conversation. I looked away, telling him we were done.

“Sure, absolutely,” he finally responded.

He took the keys from me and darted outside, probably knowing he wouldn't have a hard time determining which car belonged to me. Not every person who drove a German car was a dickhead, but every dickhead drove a German car.

Hutcherson moved on, and I stepped up to the counter, staring at the girl as she stapled more papers and tucked them into a plastic sleeve with a set of keys.

“Hi,” I said, keeping my voice low and calm even though my heart was jackhammering in my chest.

“Hey,” she replied, not looking at me. “Just a minute, please.” And then she spun around, pushing a button and speaking into an intercom. “Can someone pull that Honda out? Pickup's here.”



And then she slid the plastic sleeve onto a hook on the wall and twisted back around, finally looking up at me.

“Hey, I’m sor—” She froze. Her eyes widened, and I held back my grin, feeling the pulse in my neck throb as I waited for what she’d do now. She recognized me. The thin fabric of her T-shirt moved up and down as her chest rose and fell in heavy breaths, and I simply watched her beautiful skin turn a delightful shade of pink.

She finally blinked, finding her voice. “Hi,” she said breathlessly, looking down and fidgeting with something on the counter. “Um, we’re actually about to close, sir. I’m sorry. One of the guy’s daughters has a birthday party tonight, and the other mechanics are leaving with him. We can schedule you for tomorrow if you like.”

I studied her, wondering how she thought she was going to just play this off. We both knew why I was here.

I knew I should take the out she was offering. I should leave and go home to wait for my wife and son.

But that wasn’t what I found myself doing.

“What about you?” I tipped my chin at her. “Are you a mechanic?”

But she just shook her head. “No. I’m sorry.”

I gave her a knowing smile and looked down at her hands, dark grease caked around her nails.

She followed my gaze and fisted her fingers, hiding them. “Maybe on a Buick or a Toyota,” she replied, “but you don’t want me messing with your fifty-thousand-dollar engine. Trust me.”

I smiled to myself, because she didn’t realize that she’d just given herself away. How did she know which car was mine? Had she seen me drive up?

Or rather, did she remember that she’d tried to steal it the other night?

“I just need an oil change.”

“Well, like I said . . . we’re closing early.”

“I’ll pay,” I insisted. “Double your rate?”

“She’ll do it.” Someone spoke up behind her, and I looked to see a middle-aged man rolling a tire past her.

“What?” she burst out, spinning her head around to glare at the man. “I have to get home.”

“Do it,” he ordered, continuing out to the garage, away from any further protest.

Must be her boss.

She turned back to me, a scowl marring her once-sweet face. And I finally saw the same temper I saw the other night when she hit me. I pulled out my wallet from the inside of my suit jacket and doled out three one-hundred-dollar bills onto the counter, not taking my eyes off her.

“Is that enough?”

She stared at the money—the money I knew she needed—as she no doubt weighed the risk of what was happening here. She didn’t know what I wanted—neither did I—but she knew I hadn’t called the cops yet, so there was a chance to get out of this. She also knew that if she sent me away, she lost control of the situation. Or whatever control she now had.

Her eyes finally rose to meet mine, and I saw a hint of mischief cross her pretty, young face.

She leaned forward, nearly whispering. “How bad do you want it?”

My fingers tightened around the wallet, and my stomach dropped a little, catching the taunting edge to her words.

Was she playing with me?

And I watched in awe as she reached over, smoothly swiped the three hundreds off the counter, and then plucked another hundred out of my hand, making it four. Stuffing them

in her back pocket, she left me there and headed into the garage.

I didn't even try to hide my smile. She had my complete attention.

Just for a while. Just for tonight.

• • •

I stood outside the garage, half-in and half-out, smoking a cigarette as the darkness shrouded the road and the surrounding woods, and watching her out of the corner of my eye. She raised my BMW up on the hydraulics and tucked a couple of tools into her back pocket as she walked underneath the car and bent her head back, loosening the plug to the oil above her.

A tune played on the radio, and it was hard to keep my eyes off her. Especially when she kept swaying ever so slightly to the music, probably without realizing it.

I was impressed, though. I half expected her to call for help. She and I were alone here now, after all. Maybe that loser guy she was with would bring some friends over to send me on my way with a few threats? But no . . . as far as I could see, she hadn't called anyone. She just got to work on my car.

Smart kid.

I nodded to the bulletin board, which had a five-by-seven portrait of a brown-eyed boy—about six months old—pinned to it. “Is that your son?”

She jerked her head back down at me, as if just noticing I was there. Her expression turned guarded, but she glanced at the picture before quickly turning back to her job under the car. “That obvious?”

I watched her, thinking about how hard it must be to raise a child at her age. I couldn't imagine whoever the father was being much help. Especially if it was that piece of shit from the other night.

“He has your eyes,” I said.

“And my ex’s temper,” she stated in a clipped tone. “I can tell already.”

Ex. “You’re too young to have exes.” I blew out a stream of smoke and dropped the butt, grinding it out with my shoe.

But she just ignored me.

I stepped into the garage, my suit coat open, and my hands in my pockets. “Do you go to college?”

She glared at me. “Customers aren’t supposed to be in the garage.”

But I ignored her and keep pressing. “You don’t want to work here for the rest of your life, do you?”

“I have to work, College Boy,” she bit out. “With a kid to support, I don’t have time for school.”

I wanted to laugh at her spunk, but I held it back.

She came out from under the car, tossed down some tools, and pressed the hydraulics button, lowering the car again and looking impatient.

“My son is about the same age,” I told her.

“At home with the wife?”

And I held her gaze, all humor gone from my mood. She was smart, I’d give her that. Strolling slowly over to her, I pulled my hand out of my pocket, taking her license with it, and tossed it on top of the toolbox in front of her.

“Talking to a woman who isn’t my wife isn’t a crime,” I said, stating it like a threat. “Trying to steal my property is.”

She stood there, staring at the license with her name and address on it, her chest rising and falling in quick, shallow breaths. Now you’re scared, aren’t you?

“What do you want?” she asked.

“What do you think I want?”

Her breath shook for a moment, but then she turned her face to me, clenching her teeth so hard, I could see her jaw

flex.

“An apology, of course,” I said as if what else could I possibly want from her.

“I want you to leave.”

“Then you need to finish my car,” I shot back, my eyes falling to that little black smudge on her slender neck.

Her eyes turned angry, and she hesitated. But she popped the hood and got back to work. I turned and headed for the other side of the car, leaning against the toolboxes and crossing my arms over my chest.

I knew I should just leave. She was scared, and she already had it rough enough.

Just get in your car, go home, and leave the kid alone.

“What are you going to do?” She leaned over the car, upending an oil container into the engine and letting it empty. “Why are you here?”

“How long have you been married?” I asked, ignoring her question.

I saw her swallow and then answer quietly. “A little over a year. But I’d barely call it a marriage anymore. I’m trying to get a divorce.”

“Trying?”

“It’s none of your business.”

No, it wasn’t. But I was making her my business.

“And you thought what you were doing was healthy?” I charged. “Letting him get you caught up in criminal activity, so he can get money to get high?”

She shot me a scowl while leaning over the car and pouring in another bottle. “And you’re any better?” she replied, her tone getting harder. “Don’t think I don’t know what you want. You would’ve called the police already if justice was what you were after.” She stood up, grabbing a cloth to wipe off her

hands. “No, you think I’m vulnerable and you can take advantage.”

No. That wasn’t what I wanted. I wasn’t trying to prey on her.

So why the hell was I here then?

“Isn’t that it?” she taunted, walking slowly toward me with a look in her eyes. “Does it turn you on—the dirty trailer park girl? You think I’ll be wild, don’t you?” She stepped up to me, her breasts brushing against my crossed arms. Leaning in, she dropped her voice low and sexy, and I could feel the heat of her body. “That’s what you’ve been thinking about, isn’t it? At church on Sunday, giving your clean wife a clean kiss on the cheek”—she offered a small smile—“you were thinking about my ass and how dirty and good and naughty I’m gonna feel . . .”

My breathing sped up, and I stared at her full bottom lip, feeling like I’d suddenly gotten myself into trouble.

Licking her lips, she leaned in further, whispering, “Pathetic fucking college boy. You wouldn’t know what to do with this ass.”

And then she rolled her hips, barely brushing mine in a little tease, and I groaned, my breath shaking. The contact sent my body reeling, and I was fully hard and hot with need.

She pulled away slowly, a smirk on her face, because she knew what she was doing to me. She might be a tough little scrapper most of the time, but the girl could be sexy as fuck.

And she’d just issued a challenge.

I watched as she took the oil can out, replaced the dipstick, and closed the hood of the car.

“Keys are in it.” She turned to me, the gloating look in her eyes still there.

Keeping my gaze on her, I reached into my jacket and pulled out my billfold again, taking out a business card. Not breaking eye contact, I placed it on the toolbox.

“Whenever you’re ready to give me that apology,” I told her.

*Please don’t lose it.*

*And please don’t use it.*

## Chapter 3

“Oh, wow.” Dylan lays down the book on the bed and turns her wide eyes on me. “That was hot. What do you think is going to happen when he sees her again?”

She giggles and turns the page, but I grab the book out of her hand.

“You can’t be serious. He’s a jerk.”

“He is not,” she argues and tries to take the book back. “He’s awesome.”

“Whatever.” I laugh, rolling onto my back and holding the book away from her. “He’s trying to pay her for sex.”

“No, he’s not.”

“All those hundreds?” I remind her. “Then what’s the money for?”

She shrugs, reaching over me to try to grab the book back. “Maybe he knows she needs it. I don’t care. I want to know what happens next!”

I hug the book to my body, laughing when she tries to pry it away.

“Oh, come on.” She pouts and gives up, lying at my side on her back. “Think about if it were Lucas, and you were . . . changing his oil.”

I roll my eyes and mumble, “Shut up.”

Of course she doesn’t.

Propping herself up on her side, she rests her head on her hand and looks down at me, her voice turning sultry and playful. “Alone in the shop at night,” she taunts. “An older man in a hot suit who knows what he’s doing . . .”

My stomach flips, and I can’t stop the image that springs into my mind. Lucas . . . seeing me for the first time in so many years . . . and everything’s changed.



“Think about him looking at you that way. Like how Jase looked at Kat,” Dylan says, “Like you’re a woman and he wants what a man wants from a woman, because his body’s on fire and he needs his hands on you.”

Lucas’s eyes fall down my body, like all of a sudden he can’t stop himself, and my breath escapes me, my lungs emptying at the thought of his gaze turning dark and possessive like Jase’s did with Kat.

An electric buzz runs under my skin, but I shake my head, clearing it.

*Jase and Kat.* My parents, Jason and Katherine, could easily have gone by those nicknames in another life.

But I’ve barely ever heard anyone ever call my dad Jason, let alone something as informal as Jase. It’s “Dad” to Madoc and me. “Jason” to my mom only. And “Mr. Caruthers” to everyone else.

“Yeah, well,” I say, pushing the fantasy of Lucas away, “I’m not like her.”

“Like what?”

“Hot.” I let out a sigh. “I’m not hot. I’m just sweet and kind and boring.”

Dylan falls back again, and we both stare up at the ceiling. “Yeah, me, too,” she breathes out. “I wear a tank top, and my dad tells me to go put some clothes on.”

We both laugh, because with a dad like Jared, she has it just as tough as me. Jared doesn’t parent his kids based on what’s right or wrong. Quite simply, if it makes him uncomfortable, he isn’t having it and that’s that.

But Dylan is better at sneaking around her father’s hang-ups and getting away with more. I’m not used to pushing the boundaries with my parents.

I want to be, though. I want to be like what Jase said.  
*Dangerous to someone.*

I gaze straight above me and slip my hand behind my head, whispering slowly, “Pathetic . . . fucking . . . college boy.” And then Dylan’s voice joins mine as we both say at once, “You wouldn’t know what to do with this ass.”

Heat pools in my belly, and Dylan and I both start to laugh.

“I kind of feel hotter now,” she tells me.

“Yeah, me, too.”

“Okay, then.” She takes the book from my arms and flips onto her stomach, opening it up. “Let’s keep reading. Learn some more dirty talk.”

. . .

*Jase . . .*

I shouldn’t have left her my card. What the hell was I thinking?

I’d met the girl twice, and in that time, there were already a dozen moments when I should’ve done something differently, like walked away.

I knew what I should do. I knew what I shouldn’t do. I knew the difference between right and wrong, but if, by some miracle, I saw her again, what I knew wouldn’t matter in the face of what I wanted.

And that couldn’t happen.

It had been a week since I’d left her my card in the garage, and thankfully, she hadn’t called. I wouldn’t seek her out, so as long as she didn’t call me—which she wouldn’t, since she probably thought I was a piece of shit, anyway—then everything would be fine.

I had the strength to stay away from temptation.

And then the fucking money. Throwing my weight around like I could buy anything I wanted. I hadn’t really been trying to buy her. Just a few minutes with her.

Walking into my house, I heard the clock chime nine as I closed the door behind me and made my way across the dark foyer. Maddie was still at her parents' with our son, so the house was deathly quiet. The baby was only a few months old, but he already loved music, so I was used to walking into the house on any given day with a wide range of tunes playing loudly: classical, oldies, eighties rock . . .

Now, nothing. I was missing him, and Madeline had called earlier today to say she'd be staying an extra week on top of the time she'd already been away.

She was avoiding me. And as much as I missed my kid, I was kind of glad she was gone. In her absence I didn't have to put up a front while I was at home.

Until she returned, anyway, and I was forced to deal with the stalemate we were in. Would she want to keep the house? Would I stay in the city permanently, so far away from my son every day? Our family's firm handled everything for her father. What would happen to those accounts now? The thing about our marriage was it wasn't just us. There were a lot of people who'd be affected.

I set my briefcase down and unbuttoned my jacket, walking upstairs to change. I threw on some jeans and a T-shirt and came back downstairs to rummage through the refrigerator. Finding a large bowl of chicken salad Maddie had left, I fixed myself a sandwich and took it into my office so I could get right back to work. I wanted my own firm in the next five years, so if I worked hard enough, built up my clientele and my reputation, I'd be able to be my own boss and set my own pace by the time my son was in school and started to remember what kind of father I was. I'd failed Maddie, but I'd make sure that kid was never sad.

I spent the next hour researching a couple of cases as well as answering a few e-mails and finishing my opening remarks for the GM lawsuit. The proceedings would start next week, so I'd be home even less than I was now. I was half tempted to

just get an apartment in the city. The commute was starting to take too much of my time.

Rummaging through the papers on my desk, I stopped. Where is the hell was that fax? I'd grabbed it before I'd left work.

"Briefcase," I mumbled, standing up. I headed back into the foyer and popped open my case, sifting through file folders for the white piece of paper I needed. But then I noticed a flashing red light from inside the dark case. I picked out my cell phone and turned it on, seeing a missed call from twenty minutes ago. It could've been any number of people—a client, Maddie, my father . . .

But my heart suddenly skipped a beat. I didn't recognize the number, and I couldn't stop myself. I redialed.

"Denton Auto Repair," an out-of-breath voice answered.

And I closed my eyes, fighting the heat drifting over my body. Shit.

"Hello?" Kat said when I didn't say anything. She sounded stressed.

I cleared my throat. "You called me?" I forced myself to say, knowing I should hang up.

She was silent for a moment, and I could hear her labored breathing. My guard went up. Was something wrong? It was after ten. The shop closed two hours ago. Why was she still there?

"Look, I'm sorry," she blurted out. "I shouldn't have called. Forget it."

"What's wrong?" I barked before she could hang up.

"Nothing. I'll be okay—"

"What happened?!"

I heard her suck in a breath, and I immediately picked up my keys and grabbed my wallet out of my briefcase, not even thinking.

“Are you close?” she asked, her voice sounding hesitant. “I’m at the garage. My ride never showed, there’s no one else I can call, and there’s a weird car sitting outside. I just—”

“I can be there in ten minutes,” I said, already walking out the door and not even caring why she’d called me of all people. “Don’t go outside.”

“Thank you.” I heard the relief in her voice.

I hung up and hurried into my car without any hesitation. That repair shop was off a secluded country road. No way in hell was she walking home.

I sped the entire way there, punching the stick shift into fourth and then fifth, my headlights falling against the blacktop highway and no other cars in sight. I wondered who her ride was that didn’t show. Probably the ex. Right now, I wouldn’t mind running into him again.

Finally, I spotted the lights of the repair shop ahead and slowed the car.

I swung into the parking lot and immediately noticed Kat, ripping her arm away from a man who’d grabbed it, another man standing beside him. I slammed on the brakes and yanked up the parking brake, jumping out of the car.

“I don’t have your money!” Kat yelled, trying to walk around them. Why the hell had she come outside?

“Then maybe we’ll have you work it off for him,” one of the guys snarled. “Huh, honey? Now tell us where he is, because one way or another we get paid!”

“Go to hell!” she barked, and I raced up, putting myself in front of her and shoving one of the guys back.

“What do you want?” I demanded, my shoulders squared and rage pouring out of every goddamn pore on my body.

Both guys were dressed like street thugs, ratty clothes and greasy hair, once of them sporting a huge tattoo on his neck.

“Fuck off, man,” the dark-haired one growled. “She owes us money. Our business is with her. Not you.”

“I don’t owe you anyth—”

“How much?” I asked the guy, cutting Kat off.

He stared at me, narrowing his eyes and looking like he was debating whether or not to deal with me.

“Four hundred,” he finally answered, his voice growing calmer.

I held his gaze and reached into my pocket, pulling out my wallet.

“What?” Kat cried behind me. “No!”

But I took out four bills and handed them over to the punk. “You don’t come near her again. You understand?”

But he just took the money and smiled lazily, like all was right with the world now. “Thanks,” he replied and then looked around me to Kat. “Nice doin’ business, Kat.”

And they both turned and headed back to their car. I stayed in front of her, feeling the heat of her anger on my back.

But I had my own fury swirling like a tornado under my skin. What the fuck was the matter with her? Why would she come outside the shop if she’d noticed a car lurking around? And what the hell would she have done if I hadn’t shown up?

What would they have done to her?

She came around me, her face twisted in anger. “I don’t need your help.”

“Then why the hell did you call me?” I barked.

“I forget!” she yelled back, spinning around. “Screw off, College Boy.”

I widened my eyes and ran my hand through my hair, fisting it. Jesus Christ! What did I do wrong? She called me.

I watched her walk back for the garage, her tight blue jeans ripped to hell, grease stains up her forearms, and her dark gray

T-shirt falling off her shoulder, exposing her skin, and I didn't know if I was angry or turned on or both. Every single one of my muscles was hot and as hard as a rock. Every. Single. One.

Charging after her, I grabbed hold of her arm, twisted her around, and threw her over my shoulder, hearing her yelp as I stood there, wrapping my arms around the backs of her thighs.

“What are you doing?” she screeched, and I saw her black baseball cap fall to the ground and the ends of her dark hair sway around my waist.

“I don't know, but it's fun,” I told her. “I can hold you like this all night. I'm kind of enjoying it, actually.”

“Let me down!”

“Not likely.”

“Jase!” she protested again. I actually don't think I ever introduced myself. But then I remember having written my nickname with my cell number on the back of my business cards.

I stood there like I was waiting for the fucking bus until she calmed down and stopped acting like a child.

“Actually, you are getting kind of heavy.” I grunted and shifted her on my shoulder. “Maybe if I stripped you down, it'd be a lighter load? You game, Trailer Park Princess?”

“Don't call me that.”

“Then stop calling me College Boy.”

She tried to twist out of my hold, throwing my balance off. “Please!” she cried.

And when I didn't budge, her breathing slowed, and she finally lowered her voice. “Jase?” she said, and my fingers tightened on her, loving the sound of my name on her lips. “I'll let you take me home, okay?”

Okay. But I didn't put her down.

Instead, I carried her all the way to the car, hearing her angry little growl behind me, because she knew I didn't trust her to not run away. She dragged my ass all the way out here and put me in the middle of her drama. I was taking her home safely.

I put her feet on the ground and opened up the car door, letting her climb in. More like she just plopped down in the seat, pouting, but she was in the car, nonetheless. Walking around to the driver's side, I climbed in, fastened my seat belt, and started the car.

"Who were those guys?" I asked her, turning on my headlights and pulling onto the dark road.

"It doesn't matter."

I arched a brow, turning to look at her. "I asked you a question."

I'd forked over four hundred dollars to get her out of trouble—what she did with the other four hundred I'd left last week, I had no idea—so she could damn well give me some answers.

"Dealers," she finally answered. "My ex owes them money, so they were shaking me down, trying to find him."

"Do you know where he is?"

"He's never far."

I shook my head, turning my eyes back out to the road.

Dealers. She said it as if it's all so normal.

What would they have done if I hadn't been there? What if they'd shown up at her goddamn house with her son there? Is that what she wanted him growing up around? Fucking losers and trash and drama . . .

I tightened my fists around the steering wheel, hearing the leather grind in my fist. "You're a mess," I bit out in low voice. "How the hell can anyone live like that?"



I saw her turn to me out of the corner of my eye. “You don’t know me. Don’t forget that.”

And then I saw her put her baseball cap back on, folding her arms over her chest.

We sat in silence, and I stared ahead, the white lines in the middle of the road racing past my car as I considered what the hell I thought I was doing. She had a point. I had no right to judge her. Her reality was far different from mine. I had money, an education, experiences that constantly reminded me how big the world was. She was a teenager who would probably struggle for everything for the rest of her life.

But . . . given our very different lives, we were both here, weren’t we? She, coming to me, because even though she would never admit it, and given how little she knew about me, she did know I would come through for her. And me, racing to her in the middle of the night, because all the money, education, or experiences in the world couldn’t buy what she made me feel.

“I do know you,” I admitted. “Because I’m just as much of a mess as you are.”

I could feel her eyes on me, and I wondered what she thought of me. Was I the asshole rich guy trying to prey on her? Was I some idiot she thought she could hustle to feed her kid?

Or could she feel me as much as I felt her on every inch of my skin? Had I been in her head at all over the past week? Because she was constantly in mine.

I saw her pick something out of the console and glanced over to see her open my wallet.

“You’re right,” she said, pulling out a picture of my son. “He’s about the same age as mine.” And then she put the snapshot back and set my wallet back down. “Someday . . . they’ll be all grown up, with their own problems, and all of this will be over.” She leaned her head back, musing. “Sometimes I just pray for time to go quicker, ya know? Like I

just want to fast-forward to forty, and hopefully the hard part will be done.”

I nodded. “Like this is all just a shit preamble to something better.”

“Yeah.” Her voice was gentle and soft. “We’ll have it together, we won’t be confused anymore, we’ll be excited about tomorrow . . .”

I kept driving, letting her words linger in the air.

She knew. She knew exactly what I was feeling, because we weren’t so different.

I turned into town, heading for her house, and she didn’t seem to notice that it was odd I knew where she lived without her telling me. Sprinkles of rain started hitting the windshield, and I turned on the wipers, slowing my speed.

“Why did you marry him?” I asked her.

I heard her take in a deep breath, but she didn’t seem angry I’d asked.

“I thought he would change,” she answered. “In his rare, genuine moments, he convinced me he loved me. But if I were listening more closely, I would’ve realized that he just wanted to bleed me dry. Cooking, cleaning, my paychecks from the garage, sex . . .” She drifted off and then continued. “He barely even remembers I exist anymore, except when he needs money. He hasn’t touched me since I was five months pregnant. He didn’t like the way my body looked anymore.”

I couldn’t help myself. I looked over at her, gazing at the smoothness and glow of her bare skin where the shirt fell off her shoulder, and the rise and fall of her breasts as she breathed. She had a beautiful figure, and he was a fucking idiot.

“Why did you marry her?” she asked me in return.

I turned my eyes back out to the road as I wound my way through her neighborhood.

*Because I didn't see you first.*

“Because I love her.” I told her the truth. “I grew up with her, she comes from a good family, my father thought it would be—”

“Yeah, I get it,” she cut me off.

But I wasn't sure she did get it. I loved my son's mother, but my love for Maddie was like everything else that never changed in my life. It was constant and routine. It never challenged me or hurt me.

Or excited me.

I was never hungry or wild for it. I never longed to feel her.

It was just there. Like my house, my job, my car . . .

I pulled up to the front of her house, a small light shining through the living room window, but the rest of the street was dark. Rain poured down heavily now, blanketing my windshield in sheets of water.

We sat there silent for a moment, and I turned to look at her, knowing she wanted to say something.

She stared out the window, making no move to get out. “What do you want with me?” she asked quietly.

I almost laughed. Not because I found the question amusing, but because I found it far too tempting. What did I want? Nothing. Everything.

“When I know, so will you,” I told her.

She smiled to herself and looked over at me, holding my eyes.

“What?” I asked.

But she just shook her head. “It's weird. For a single moment . . . I didn't want to fast-forward.”

And my stomach flipped as she held my eyes, everything in them telling me she felt what I was feeling.

I could touch her. I could reach over and take her, and guide her into my lap and touch her if I wanted to.

“You’d better get out of this car,” I warned.

She tried to hide her smile, but I still saw it. And I watched her finally climb out of the car and into the pouring rain.

I didn’t want to fast-forward, either. In fact, I wanted time to slow as much as possible.

She rounded the front of the car, her hair turning black as it got wet, and came to stand at my window. I watched as the rain drenched her clothes, the shirt molding to her breasts and running down the olive-toned skin of her chest. I tightened my fist around the steering wheel again.

And then slowly, she leaned down and placed her lips against my window, closing her eyes and kissing it.

I watched as she backed away, holding my eyes, and then spun around and ran to her house, disappearing into the warm glow.

Now I knew.

I put the car in first gear and drove off, knowing exactly what I wanted from her.

## Chapter 4

“Damn.” Dylan glances at me, and I know we’re both thinking the same thing.

“Don’t worry,” I tease. “Someone is going to want you like that, so badly Jared will go crazy. Be careful what you wish for.”

She scoffs and turns the page to the next chapter. Dylan really has no clue.

All she sees is what’s right in front of her. Guys are drawn to her, because of her spirit and smiles. She’s a happy person, and she makes people feel good when they’re around her.

I’m not like that. I’m just kind of there. Like empty space.

And my mind circles back to Dylan’s question. What if Jase was Lucas? Would he see me as anything other than his friends’ kid sister? Would he feel that kind of physical pull to me?

I doubt it.

Lucas knew me when I needed to get pushed on the swings and all I wanted to watch on TV was the Disney Channel. I’d been kissed, I’d been touched, but I’d never felt compelled to experience more.

What did Jase want with? What did he want to do to her? She was only slightly older than me, so what did he see in her that men didn’t see in me?

But I guess that’s not true. There were boys who had been interested in me.

I was still curious, though . . . what did desire feel like for someone when one woman could give him what he needed but not another?

• • •

*Jase . . .*

Stepping through the front door, I walked into my home and immediately saw Maddie sweeping into the foyer. Our son sat on her hip as she swung his diaper bag on her other shoulder. “You’re home early.” She forced a small smile, her voice light.

“Where are you going?” I asked, setting my briefcase down.

I reached out a hand and rubbed Madoc’s bald head.

“We have a doctor’s appointment,” she said, wiping some drool from the corner of his mouth. “Just a checkup, and then we’re going to the library before I drop him off with my mother, so I can meet with the caterers for my sister’s wedding.”

“Well, here then.” I held out my hands, ready to take him. “Just leave him with me, and you can do what you need to do.”

Just because we were practically roommates these days didn’t mean I wasn’t still my son’s father.

“Oh, Jase.” She laughed like it was a joke. “Have you ever changed his diaper? You’d be calling me in ten minutes, breaking down.”

“I think I can handle it.” I reached out for him again. “I went to Harvard.”

But she just shook her head and walked around me. “I don’t have time to show you where the formula is, how to make it, the toys he likes to play with . . . trust me,” she said, kind of sounding like she was talking to a child. “Use the peace and quiet to get some work done. I’ll be home in a few hours. We have dinner with your parents later, so I laid out a suit for you. Just don’t forget to shower,” she instructed. “You kind of smell like that cologne your mom bought you last Christmas that I threw away. Did she buy you another bottle?”

“Maddie?” I argued, seeing her open the door. “I want him  
—”

“It’ll just stress me out,” she fought. “Making me come all the way back here when you need help . . .” And then she kissed the air between us. “Love you. Bye.”

And she pulled the door closed.

For a few minutes I stood there, trying to figure out why she thought I couldn’t take care of my son. Why she seemed in such a hurry to leave.

It was me, no doubt. I’d cut her off for so long and put him in her care so much, she didn’t know how to let me help her with him.

Or maybe she didn’t want to be around me any more than I wanted to be with her.

My phone rang in my briefcase, and I opened it up to retrieve it. Hitting the green Call button, I brought it my ear.

“Yes?”

“This is Rhodes BMW, sir.”

“Yes?”

“Sir, the car you wanted delivered today was sent back.”

*Sent back? What?*

I tore the phone away from my ear and ended the call. *Sent back?*

Digging under some files, I pulled my wallet out, stuck it in my breast pocket, and headed for the door.

I’d purchased a car for Kat, not expecting anything, and I could understand her being compelled to not accept such a large gift, but hell . . . She could’ve been attacked the other night. She was nearly attacked, actually. You would think a young woman with a child to worry about would choose sense over pride and take a vehicle that would improve the chances of keeping her and her kid safe.

It wasn’t like it was a new car, either. If she thought the gift meant I was intending to keep her as a mistress, I’d damn well

put her in a brand new Bimmer, or better yet, let her pick the car and color herself.

Climbing into my car, I shifted it into gear and sped off. The daylight spilled through the trees, and I was grateful it was finally warm. I worried about Kat. I hated where she lived, I hated the environment her son was faced with every day, and even though he was too young to notice now, he eventually would. Coming home at night, I wondered about her and him. Were they warm? Were they safe? Was he properly fed?

I wanted her to have everything and to not worry about anything.

Passing through the denser neighborhoods, I drove by the high school, when it occurring to me that Kat probably graduated from there only last year. We were only seven years apart in age, but worlds apart in education and experience.

It should've unnerved me. But instead, it excited me. I liked how she was different from other women I'd known.

Young, impulsive, angry . . . and completely unrefined. She felt so forbidden to me, and I wanted her.

I also liked how she seemed to need me, just a little.

Finally giving in and pulling in front of her house, I turned off the car, hesitating a moment. I wasn't sure if that son of a bitch was home, but I was completely prepared to do what I had to do.

Leaving my car, I made sure to lock it, and I walked up to her house, passing through the creaking gate of the chain-link fence and up the steps.

"Hello?" I called, knocking on the wooden screen door.

"Yes?" someone called out, and I spotted a shadow approaching through the screen.

The door whined as she pushed it open, and I saw a woman, not much older than Kat, with short blond hair and a baby bottle in her hand.



“Is Kat here?” I asked.

Her eyes fell down my form, looking hesitant, and I immediately got the impression that people in suits in this neighborhood meant bad news.

“I’m a friend,” I explained.

Her eyes narrowed. “Oh, are you Mr. Slater? She babysits for you and your wife, right?”

*She babysits, too? In addition to working at the garage?*

“Sure.” I answered, not sure who this woman was and deciding to protect Kat. “That’s me.”

This woman could be a friend of her husband’s. No use telling the truth, just in case he decided to take it out on her. Not that I’d gotten any information saying he’d been abusive with her, but I had my suspicions. He was the type.

She jerked her head. “Yeah, she’s in the backyard. I’ll walk you.”

She stepped out the front door, and I backed away to let her through as she jogged down the porch steps and around to the side of the house. I quickly followed, but as soon as we neared the rear of the home, I started to slow.

Kat lay on her stomach on the grass, perched up on her elbows, as a small child with her brown hair squealed while catching water from their sprinkler in his little green cup.

She wore a short white sundress with blue flowers and thin straps over her shoulders that carried to her back, and all I could do was gaze down her beautiful, smooth skin.

The dress was completely plastered to her body. Oh, my God.

The sprinkler, which I assumed to be homemade since it was just a two-liter bottle taped to a hose with water shooting out of the two dozen or so holes, was hitting her as she lay on the grass, drenching her back, arms, legs, and dress.

I could see the olive tones of her skin through the wet material.

“Kat?” her friend—or maybe it was her sister—called.

Kat turned her head toward us and locked eyes with me, her smile falling.

I cleared my throat and slid my hand into my pocket. “Did you forget?” I asked, acting casual. “You’re babysitting tonight. Remember?”

Her eyebrows nose-dived and she started to rise. “Huh?”

Her friend laughed and looked at me. “Yeah, I think she forgot.”

“Do you have someone to watch your son?” I asked Kat and then looked to her friend, explaining, “Mine has a cold. We wouldn’t want Jared to get sick.”

Kat sat up, and I dropped my eyes, taking in the way the fabric fell over her body. While the front of her dress wasn’t as drenched as the back, it was wet in certain areas and her chest dripped with water.

I struggled to breathe, and heat pooled in my groin.

Her friend finally sighed. “I can do it, I guess.”

I smiled, my veins running hot with the prospect of being alone with her. “Thank you.”

Her friend walked over and picked up Jared, whose name I’d learned from the investigator’s information, while Kat just sat there, looking a little lost.

“I’m Deena, by the way,” her friend said as she passed by me, carrying Jared. “I take care of all the kids in the neighborhood.”

I reached out to take the hand she offered. “Jase.”

She nodded and walked past me, probably into the house to get Jared out of his wet clothes.

“What the hell are you doing?” I heard Kat ask in an accusing tone.

I turned my gaze back to her to see that she’d stood up. The dress stuck to her body, and her thighs glistened with water.

“You refused the car,” I pointed out.

She approached me with a challenge in her eyes, keeping her voice low. “You can’t buy me. I don’t know what you want \_\_\_”

“I want you to have reliable transportation for your safety,” I said, cutting her off. “You’re telling me you can’t use a vehicle when you have a child? What if he needed a trip to the ER?”

“You want me to owe you,” she corrected. “You’re married, and I’m not a whore.”

She brushed past me and ran up the steps to the house in her bare feet. It only took a moment before I spun around and charged after her.

Swinging open the screen door, I stepped into the kitchen and caught her arm, pulling her back to me.

“I don’t want you to owe me,” I said in a low voice, staring down at her while we stood chest to chest. “I just . . . I think about you, and I want . . .”

She stood there, her chest rising and falling, like she was too afraid to move and too afraid to run.

A girl like this was used to disappointment—used to being used—but I wasn’t going to hurt her. I wasn’t going to steal from her or hit her, and I wasn’t going to make her do things that put her in danger.

And when I looked at her, I didn’t see just a piece of ass. I saw something to look forward to.

I took a step, walking into her and slowly backing her into the wall. “My marriage is on paper only, and it’s over. I already know that. I don’t want to hurt her, but I’ve never

thought about her the way I think about you. I see the way you look at me, kid. This is not one-sided on my part.” I called her out. “Is it?”

She remained still, her breathing trembling like she couldn't fight, but she was too afraid to give in, as well. She didn't want to fight me.

“Now we can keep this clean, if you want. I can make good on that lie and let you babysit my son,” I suggested. “Would you prefer that?”

I kept walking her backward, invading her space.

This was what I was good at. Threats and intimidation. I knew I shouldn't, but I loved the way she retreated. I never felt powerful outside work, faced with my failures at home, and I was completely turned on.

“I'd pay you well,” I told her. “And at the end of the night, when I drove you home, I'd try not to pull off the road.” I reached down and grazed the inside of her thigh, still dripping with water from the sprinkler, making her gasp. “And I'd try not to get you into the backseat of my car.” And then I leaned down, whispering against her lips. “Because I have very good control . . . until I don't.”

She ran into the wall and let out a whimper, and I let my eyes fall to her breasts, seeing the shape of them perfectly outlined through the wet fabric. I clenched my jaw, already feeling her in my mouth.

I placed my finger under her chin and raised it, tipping her eyes up at me. “Is that what you want?” I asked. “To be something for me to play with?”

Her hips grazed mine, and she bit her bottom lip, turning her head away.

The heat of her thighs was so close and I couldn't hold back anymore. Reaching down, I grabbed the back of her thigh in one hand and cupped her face with the other and pressed the full length of my body against hers, our lips an inch away from each other.

“I don’t want that, Kat,” I whisper. “You know what I want? I want you to think about me. Do you think about me?” She stood frozen, her eyes squeezed shut, but her body started making little movements, grinding on mine and getting me hot.

“Yeah,” I gloated. “You do, don’t you?”

And I reached under her dress, grabbed hold of her soaked panties, and ripped them clean off her body, the tearing fabric like a shot of fucking heroin to my veins.

She let out a small cry and wrapped her arms around my neck.

“You think about wrapping these legs around me and opening that shirt for me, so I can touch you,” I recited as I lifted her up and guided her thighs around my waist. “You think about a dark room with a big bed and laying out on twenty-four-hundred-dollar sheets with nothing but me between your legs.”

“Yes,” she breathed out.

I inched my mouth closer to hers, layering our lips so that we were both just inhaling and exhaling, tasting each other.

I reached down between us and slid my fingers along the smooth skin of her heat, feeling how wet she was.

Fuck, I couldn’t wait.

Holding her with one hand, I worked at my belt, unfastening it, and then scrambled for the button and zipper of my pants.

“Okay, I’ve got everything!” a voice called.

But I barely fucking cared. I took her mouth in mine, sinking my lips and tongue into her and claiming her. The taste of water hit my mouth, and a rush of warmth washed over me as I gripped her wet thigh in my hand.

“Call when you’re done later!”

Kat pulled away from the kiss. “Thanks, Deena!” she shouted, out of breath. “I’ll pick him up later.”

And then her lips were on mine again as she slipped her tongue into my mouth and bit down on my bottom lip. It was so good, an electric shock coursed down my spine.

“Goddamn it.” I slammed one hand into the wall by her head, losing my cool.

But I went back for more, covering her lips with mine and feeling my hands hum every single place I touched and held her.

I didn’t know where the bedroom or living room was, and even though it would only take a moment to find out, we didn’t have that much time. I needed her.

“What are you waiting for?” she taunted in my ear. “Or does College Boy need his twenty-four-hundred-dollar sheets to fuck me like a man?”

I growled and spun her around, taking both of us to the ground. What a mouthy little brat.

On my knees, I whipped off my jacket, tie, and ripped open my shirt, throwing it off to the side.

Coming back down on her, I kissed her hard, while pulling the cold strap of her dress down and grinding between her legs.

I dove down, cupping her breast and covering the nipple with my mouth. “Jesus, you’re perfect.”

She moaned, squirming as I kissed and teased her, tugging at her with my teeth.

“Condom?” I was embarrassed to have to ask, but I hadn’t needed them in a while, nor was I planning on this.

She nodded and reached for her purse on the kitchen chair. I watched as she pulled one out and handed it to me.

I unwrapped the condom and reached down, rolling it on. “He’s not allowed to touch you at all anymore.”

Positioning myself at her entrance, I stared down at her and suddenly felt her tense.

“I’m a little scared,” she said.

I wasn’t sure what she meant, though. Clearly she’d been with at least one man before.

But then it hit me. The whole reason she refused the car. She was worried about where this all led, and I didn’t have the answers any more than she did.

I could only tell her what I could promise. “I’ve got you.”

She drew in a breath and pulled me back down, eating me up and clawing at my back as I pushed myself inside her.

“Ah,” she panted, throwing her head back.

“Oh, God,” I groaned, sinking deeper and shuddering at the wet heat. Fuck, she was tight.

Pulling slowly out, I thrust back in and felt everything in my body come alive. The hairs on my arms stood up, a buzz coursed under my skin, and I’d never wanted to kiss someone so hard she’d break.

Her husband could walk in the front door, and I wouldn’t stop.

“Jase,” she whimpered, lifting her head up and her whole body going tense. “Oh, God.”

“You coming already?” I snatched up her lips, teasing her.

“Yes.” She slipped her hands inside my pants, grabbing hold of my ass to pull me deeper inside of her, and then bit my jaw, whispering against my skin. “More. Harder.”

I pushed myself up on one arm, sliding my other hand under her ass, and watched in fucking awe as her body moved underneath me and her face tensed up in pleasure as I rode her harder and harder.

Sweat glided down my back and glistened on her top lip. I felt her body clench up around me, and then she let out a

scream as she moaned and took everything I had to give.

Her body shook and her neck arched back, opening for my mouth.

“You’re so beautiful,” I whispered against her neck, biting it. “Even hotter when you’re getting fucked.”

I thrust a few more times, harder and deeper, riding her like I couldn’t get enough. She spread her legs wider, and I sucked her nipple into my mouth again, groaning as my orgasm crested, and I finally spilled, sinking as deeply as I could and trying to feel every inch of her.

Her warmth surrounded me, and I couldn’t move anymore, savoring the feel of her body under mine.

“So what’s with the tattoo?”

I pulled my head up to see her calm, amused eyes as if we hadn’t just rutted like animals on her kitchen floor.

I glanced at my left arm, high up, just below the shoulder joint, seeing the tattoo.

“You don’t look like the type,” she mused.

I gave a weak laugh. “I’m not. It was a misspent weekend in Hong Kong when I was twenty-two,” I explained. “I’d just graduated from college, was headed off to law school, and my buddies and I did a lot of things we shouldn’t have.”

I felt her shake with a laugh. “But why a circle?”

I shrugged, not sure how to explain. It had made sense at the time.

The tattoo was a circle designed to look like it was painted with a paintbrush. However, there was a flaw. The brushstroke stopped just before it met the beginning of the circle again.

“It’s a perfect circle,” I told her. “The same diameter any way you measure it. Even, clean, perfect.” And then I dropped my forehead to hers, closing my eyes. “But it’s incomplete.”



I'd loved its one flaw. I'd loved the artistry and skill that it took to tattoo this perfect circle without a stencil, and I loved how it was left open and unfinished.

There was so much right about it, but still, it was incomplete. Still missing something.

I pulled out of her and stood up, disposing of the condom and cleaning up. Pulling my pants up, I zipped them and fastened my belt before leaning back down to help her up.

Taking her in my arms, I kissed her, her breast still exposed and her damp dress hanging off her body.

"Things are going to change," I told her. "I want you out of here and away from him."

But she just fixed her dress and shook her head. "I don't want money from you."

"Do you want things for Jared?"

She darted her eyes to me, a small scowl on her face. "Stop using him against me."

I let out a sigh, exhausted after the sex, and took her chin, tipping it back up so that her eyes met mine.

"A house in a better neighborhood—with trees and a front yard and friends?" I asked. "A car, so you can get him to school or the doctor or the grocery store."

But she took my hand away and looked at me defiantly. "No," she argued. "I liked this. I don't want it to change. I don't want to be your pussy-at-the-ready. I want to be surprised and carried away again. Nothing else between us. Just this, okay?"

I kissed her forehead, letting her have her way, because I was too tired to fight right now. I was happy she didn't regret today, and I was even happier that she wanted more.

Things would change, though. I knew what I wanted, and I always got what I wanted.

One way or another.

• • •

The book shakes in my hand, and Dylan and I just stare at the page.

“Jared?” she says, sounding confused.

“Madoc?” I follow suit, remembering the names mentioned in the text.

*Caruthers?*

And then it seems to hit both of us all at once, and she scurries to sit up. “Grandma?”

“Mom?” I whimper.

*Oh, my God.*

*Oh, my God!* I bury my face in my pillow and scream, every muscle in my body tightening with shock and distaste. “Oh, my God, no!”

She snatches the book away and turns the page, a devilish little grin of excitement on her face.

“Give that to me, you perv!” I grab for the book and throw it across the room, where it slams against the wall and lands on the floor. “I can’t believe we just read that!”

She busts up laughing, keeling over so that her forehead crashes into the comforter. “That was epic!” she screams, punching the bed with her fists.

“Ugh!” I groan and shiver at the same time, trying to rub the cooties off me. “We’re not reading any more.”

“Why?” She pops her head up and looks at me like a kid who wants candy.

“Because it’s your grandparents, and it’s my parents, and gross!”

“It’s not my grandparents,” she argues, trying to reason. “It has to be just a coincidence. I want to read more.”

Her eyes are still lit up like a kid going to see Santa. She crawls off the bed and makes a mad dash for the book, but I

scurry after her. Both of us fall on the floor, trying to get the book away from each other, but we just end up laughing.

“It wasn’t graphic,” she protests. “You should see what’s on my Kindle. This is nothing.”

“No!” I bellow and yank the book free of her grasp.

I stand up and hold it behind my back, glancing at the clock. “Oh, look, the time. You need to get ready for your race.”

She twists her lips up in a pout and darts her eyes to the clock, too. It’s after six. In all honesty, we should get going, and she knows it.

“I’m going to pick up James at his friend’s house and grab something to eat,” she says, walking for the door. “I’ll be back to pick you up in a bit, so be ready. And bring the book!”

She opens the door, walks out, and then quickly spins around. “And let me know if you get to the twenty-four-hundred-dollar-sheets part with his mouth—”

I reach up to cover my ears, but she’s already slammed the door closed.

## Chapter 5

*Kat . . .*

Running my hand down the countertop, I felt the cool, clean surface, no peeling or knife marks from years of using it as a cutting board. I slipped off my sandals to savor the smooth hardwood floors and the way they shone with the sun coming through the kitchen window.

The house was beautiful.

A white two-story with black shutters and a full front- and backyard and garage. *Damn you, Jase Caruthers.*

He bought me a house.

The grass was a green like I'd only seen in magazines, rich and lush, and when I looked out the window, the view was even more stunning. Just more houses with more of the same, but it was a completely different world to me.

He'd chosen well. He knew what a parent would want for their child.

But I couldn't take it. He could come in, make demands anytime he wanted, and I could be as trapped by him as I was by Thomas.

So what should I do then? Stay in my crappy house in my crappy neighborhood with Thomas? He didn't care about me or his son, and tomorrow would be more of the same.

And in a year, still nothing would be different. Fighting to stay afloat while Jared grew up with no more opportunities than I had, and eventually I'd be on to child number three from another failed relationship, simply eating and breathing to exist with no plans and no future, watching my kids repeat the same mistakes.

I looked over at Jared, seeing him crawl across the floor. There was still time. Still time to make his life better before he became old enough to remember all of the bad.

I ran my hands up and down the thighs of my jeans, remembering the pile of overdue bills on the counter at home, the empty refrigerator, the rent we were two months late on, how I was scrounging for everything . . .

That could end right now. And the icing on the cake came when I looked at the deed sent to me in the mail today.

I was the owner, not Jase. He gave me this house with no strings attached. I could kick him out and keep him out. If I wanted.

I shouldn't take the house.

And upon arriving, I was surprised with the same car I'd refused last week, sitting in the driveway. The keys and a cell phone sat on the kitchen table with no note and only one number in the phone. I'd never had a cell phone, and everything, all at once, felt like dream.

I walked into the living room, already thinking about what it would look like with furniture. Jase had made sure to bring in the necessities. There was a couch, a kitchen table, a few chairs, a bed and a crib, a radio that was currently playing "Cradle of Love," but he'd left everything else to me.

"What do you see out there?" I smiled wide at Jared, walking over to where he'd pulled himself up to the window.

He couldn't walk yet, but it wouldn't be long. I peeled back the curtain, seeing the house next door, and a large maple, full of green leaves—standing between the two houses.

"Pretty cool, huh?" I peered down at him, and he just gazed back up at me with so much curiosity in his eyes. He never made a lot of baby talk, but those eyes always said it all.

And I loved that look of wonder in his face. I wanted to see him climb that tree and have a dog to play with in the yard, and I wanted to see him ride his bike down this street.

And—I hated to admit—I wanted to see Jase walking around this house. Not in his boring, tight-ass suits but in a T-

shirt and jeans, coming up behind me and kissing my neck as I made our dinner at the kitchen counter.

I walked to the table and picked up the cell phone he'd left, not knowing what the hell to say to him. He hadn't called since the night in the kitchen or to see if I got the deed to the house. And judging by the cell phone he left, he was leaving the ball in my court. I didn't have to do anything.

So why did I want to hear his voice?

I'm a mess, too. His words came back, and I saw that look on his face all over again. The one that said not much made him happy. *Like all of this is just a shit preamble to something better.*

I dialed the one number in the phone, letting it ring several times as my heart started pounding.

And then I heard his voice.

"Kat?"

A flutter hit my stomach at his quiet and gentle voice, and all of a sudden, I could barely speak. I dropped my head, speaking low. "Hey."

But he just sat there, not saying anything. All I could hear was his breathing, remember the taste of his lips when he held me the other night.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" I asked.

He released a nervous laugh, and I stood frozen, my eyes on Jared but my head consumed with Jase.

"I'm a man who gets paid a lot of money to talk a good talk," he explained. "But you're my kryptonite. I feel like a sixteen-year-old kid who can't form a fucking sentence."

I chewed on my bottom lip, loving that I had any power over him. "I like the house."

"Just 'like'?"

I ran my hand over the bannister as I walked down the hall to the kitchen. “I love the house. Jared loves the yard. I . . .”

I stopped, unable to get over the lump in my throat. I knew what I wanted, and I knew what I should do, and they were complete opposites. The war in my head was in deciding if the consequences were worth it.

He was silent as well, and I didn’t know if he was trying not to push me, if he’d reconsidered, or if he honestly didn’t know what to say. I had no idea if I’d been his only affair, but I gathered this was new territory for him. He bought me a house and car. I had to be important to him, right?

But then again, he wasn’t asking me to divorce Thomas. And he hadn’t offered to do the same.

I looked down at the floor, so nervous my stomach was as tight as a knot. “What do you want with me?” I asked again.

“Whatever you want to give me,” he answered. “I want a woman who can’t get enough of me, Kat. If you can’t give me that, then keep the house and the car, and don’t call me again.”

I closed my eyes as tears pooled. It was too much.

I could enjoy a man and sever the emotions when it was just sex, but . . . I was old enough to know, if you crave someone bad enough, sex turns into something else.

And “something else” can get very complicated and very painful.

“Jared goes to sleep at seven,” I nearly whispered, gripping the phone as anticipation swirled in my stomach. “Do you have a key?”

His voice was raspy. “No.”

“I’ll leave the door open for you then,” I told him. “Please hurry.”

. . .

Thomas would find out where I was. I hadn’t seen him in four days, but he’d pop up. I’d heard he was fooling around with

someone else, something that I didn't doubt. Let him get her pregnant and hopefully that would be the last I'd see of him.

Of course, I wouldn't wish him on any woman, but whoever she was she would learn her lessons as quickly as I'd learned mine, no doubt.

After feeding and bathing Jared, I settled him into his new crib, brought the radio up, and turned on some faint music and rubbed his back until he fell asleep. I discovered early on he didn't care for my singing, but if I played the radio, the kid fell to sleep pretty quickly. He liked noise.

I'd picked the room that faced the tree between our house and the neighbor's for him, knowing that he would probably like it as he grew up. I'm sure he'd be trying to climb the tree in a few years, but I'd worry about that later. Moving in to my own home was enough of an adjustment for right now.

Traipsing back downstairs, I finished putting away everything I'd managed to salvage in the rush to leave my former place and set up the lamps and pictures on the mantel.

A mantel. I put my hand over my mouth, hiding my smile. I had a mantel.

I walked to the door, making sure it was unlocked, and flipped on the porch light. I should probably go clean myself up. He would be here soon.

I was still wearing the same clothes from earlier today, the baggy blue jeans that fell off my hips and an old Shelburne Falls High Pirates T-shirt with the bottom cut off, exposing my stomach. A souvenir from my cheerleading days.

I unwound the rubber band from my hair, letting it spill down my back, and headed into the kitchen to grab a glass of water before I went to the shower.

"If I knew your ass was worth this much," a deep voice drawled behind me, "I would've pimped you out a long time ago."



I spun around, my breath catching in my throat as the water in my glass spilled on my shirt and stomach.

No.

Thomas stood in the entryway to the kitchen, filling the space and cutting out the light, as he held Jared in his arms. His blond hair was slicked back into a ponytail, and I could smell the cigarette smoke on his jeans and jacket from here. A cry escaped as I darted forward.

“Thomas, give him to me!”

But he reared back, shaking his head at me. “What? I can’t see my son now?” He wrapped his fist around Jared’s arm and squeezed until the baby started crying. “I bet if I tell the courts you’re a high-priced whore, they’ll consider me a better parent for him.”

“Give him to me!” I screamed, tears welling as I leapt for him. “You’re going to hurt him!”

“No, I don’t think so.” He knocked me back and then released Jared, looking down at him and speaking in a light, childlike tone. “Someone has gotten a little big for her britches and thinks she runs the show now. Mommy’s been bad.”

And then he looked to me, rocking Jared back and forth on his hip. “But you know the drill, right?” he said. “You want to keep me happy, you know what to do.”

I balled up my fists, glaring at him. Storming over to my purse on the counter, I grabbed the wad of bills in my wallet. Forty-two dollars.

I walked over and shoved it in his hand. “That’s everything I have. Now get out!”

“That’s not everything.” He tsked, stuffing the money in his pocket and holding out his hand again. “Car keys.”

“It’s not my car,” I growled.

“All right,” he said, looking falsely sympathetic. “Say, ‘Bye, Mommy.’”

He turned around, taking Jared with him.

“Thomas, stop!” I cried.

Turning around again, I retrieved the keys from my purse and handed them over.

“Atta girl.” And then he looked me up and down. “Now you know what else makes me happy, right? Come on. One last time before I leave.”

I shook my head, flashing my eyes quickly to the knife that sat on the counter.

“Now!” he barked, making me jump. “Or I’ll do you right here and let him watch.”

I shook, tears streaming down my face. If I lunged him, Jared could get hurt. I’d never overpower him, and he could run off with my kid.

I swallowed the sobs in my throat, staring at him through blurry eyes as I pulled my shirt over my head, leaving me in my bra.

But then I blinked, seeing a dark form behind him, and I sucked in a breath.

Jase.

He crept slowly up the foyer, but Thomas must’ve sensed him or saw my eyes flash to him, because he twisted around.

Jase lunged for him, wrapping his arm around his neck, yelling, “Kat!”

I rushed forward and caught Jared just as Thomas dropped him.

“Oh, my God,” I cried, holding my son in my arms and standing there as Jase slammed Thomas into the wall, my car keys falling out of his hand as his head hit the corner.

He grunted and closed his eyes, still standing but no longer fighting.

“Now I want you to look at me and memorize my face.” Jase spun him around, holding him up by the collar. “Because the next time you see me, it will mean the end of you. You know why?” he growled, a mere inch from Thomas’s face. “Because I’m smart, I’m rich, and I know people who can make you wish you were dead. I can do whatever the hell I want and no one can stop me. If you ever”—he slammed him into the wall again—“come near her or her son again, I will make sure every shit bag in gen pop thinks you’re a rapist, and you know what happens to rapists in prison, right?” He leaned into his ear, but I could hear his whisper. “No one will keep you safe. I will make sure of that, and it won’t stop until you’re crying like a little girl.”

Thomas gasped for air under the pressure Jase was putting on his neck, and I hugged Jared closer, turning him around—away from the two men—and crying.

“You understand?” I heard Jase say. “Good. Now leave, and go far away before I make you go away. I’ll find you when it’s time to sign your divorce papers.”

I waited, finally hearing uneven footsteps trod along the floor before the door opened and closed. I turned around to see Jase come right for me.

Holding on to Jared with one hand, I clutched onto Jase with the other, burying my face in his collar.

“Are you okay?” he breathed out, one arm around my waist and the other on the back of my neck. Jared whimpered between us.

I nodded, kissing the top of Jared’s head. “I am now.”

He placed his finger under my chin, lifting it and kissing me softly on the lips.

“You were amazing,” I whispered against his mouth, feeling his lips curl into a small smile.

“Oh, you liked that, huh?”

I gave a weak laugh, readjusting Jared on my hip. “And I thought you were just a pampered yuppie. Are you like that in court?”

“Oh, no.” He kissed my forehead. “People are watching then. But you don’t want to see me at a business lunch. That’s pretty scary.”

“I’m sure.”

He walked over to the back door, turning on the porch light and checking the lock. “I’ll follow you upstairs.” He turned and guided me out of the kitchen. “We’ll move Jared’s crib into your room until I can get an alarm system set up here.”

Jase locked the front door and went upstairs to make sure all the windows were closed and locked before moving the crib from Jared’s room to mine. I rocked Jared in my arms until he stopped crying and rested out on my chest, finally fast asleep. I stared down at him, his little eyelids fluttering from time to time like he was having a bad dream. I didn’t know if babies had those, but I just wanted to erase the past nine months from this kid’s life like none of it had ever happened. He was going to be happy now.

I ran my fingers over his arm, seeing the red mark from where Thomas had hurt him, and tightened my arms around him. *He’ll never get to you again.*

Jase came into the room and took off his jacket, laying it on the bed like that’s where it always went, and walked over as I stared down at Jared, sleeping in the crib.

“He won’t be back.”

“I know.” I brushed a hand over Jared’s hair. “You were a hassle, and he doesn’t like hassles. He’s off to whatever’s next. I’m not worth it.”

His hot breath fell against my ear, sounding desperate, as his arm slipped around my bare stomach. “Yes, you are.”

I turned around, wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing myself into him as I kissed him hard. I held him so

tightly and breathed him in, the sandalwood in his aftershave heating my blood and making my body tingle. So safe.

His mouth moved over mine, the heat of his lips spreading down my neck and into my stomach. I flicked his tongue with mine, gripping his collar as he slipped a hand inside my baggy jeans, taking my ass in his hands. His tongue and lips left a heated trail across my cheek and down my neck, and I moaned.

“Jase.”

I’d only ever been with Thomas. I’d never been kissed like this. He tasted me and teased me, and if I closed my eyes, I could imagine that he was mine.

This was our house, I’d wake up next to him in the morning, and all I had to worry about tomorrow was taking Jared to the park and what I’d make us for dinner.

He kissed along my jaw, darting out with his teeth to bite every so often. I pressed my body into his, feeling how hard he was, and my clit began to throb. I groaned, feeling like if I grinded into him just a little I would come.

“What are you smiling at?” he asked.

I kept my eyes closed and my head tipped back, giving him full access. “You. I like the way you kiss.”

He didn’t move for a moment, and then I felt a kiss below my ear. “Like that?”

I smiled wider and tapped the corner of my mouth. “Do here.”

He did, and I felt tingles spread down my legs.

“And here.” I tapped the corner of my eye.

He placed a small kiss there, and I shivered even more than when he used his tongue.

He pinched my chin between his fingers, and I opened my eyes to see him gazing down at me.

“You’re going to turn my world upside down, aren’t you, kid?”

I wrapped my arms around him and buried my face in his neck, hiding my smile.

I hoped so. I didn’t want to hurt him, and I didn’t want him to hurt me. I didn’t want to hurt his family or mine.

But I just didn’t want to stop feeling this.

Nothing else existed. No one else was between us.

This was our house and our bed. Ours.

• • •

Walking into Lockes-on-the-Bluff, a quaint pub-style restaurant up in the hills, I let the door fall closed behind me and immediately inhaled the aroma of steak, wood, and earth. The bar on the lower level was underground, and the scent of water—like in a cave—carried up to the restaurant, giving it a subterranean feel, enhanced by the dim candlelit setting. It was cleaner, closer, and probably better paying than the repair shop, so I thought I’d give it a shot.

“Hi,” I said after I’d set down my purse on the bar stool. “I was wondering if you were hiring. I have experience serving and bartending.”

Serving, yes. But I’d never actually bartended. It didn’t matter. These places never checked work history, anyway.

The bartender capped the bottle he’d been pouring and walked over.

“Well, you can fill out an application, and I’ll leave it for the day manager,” he suggested. “He usually handles the hiring.”

“Thanks.”

I sat down and took a pen out of my purse as he handed me an application. Glasses clinked to my left, and I heard laughter coming from the restaurant. Glancing around, I took in the

setting, admiring the servers' uniforms. Black slacks with white shirts and burgundy ties.

One of the few places an undereducated nineteen-year-old could make good money off rich patrons and not have to take off her clothes.

But then I turned away, rolling my eyes at myself in my head. Yeah, right. Jase didn't pay me for sex, necessarily, but I was definitely a kept woman.

And I needed to keep making my own money to make sure I didn't accept anything more from him than I already had. I could make excuses for the house and car, justifying that I would do what was necessary for my son, but I couldn't delude myself that it was okay to let Jase pay the bills and buy the food. That was on me and needed to stay that way.

Turning my eyes back to the paper, I stopped, catching sight of a man and a woman at a table. I couldn't help but stare.

Jase was sitting next to a blonde in a white dress, with an older man at the table with them. She was young, a few years older than me maybe, and laughing. A weight hit my chest, making it harder to breathe as I watched Jase smile at her.

Why was he smiling at her?

It was her. His wife. I knew it was her.

And she looked so different than me. Pristine, manicured, stylish . . . her hands and nails as she picked up her champagne glass looked as perfect as a marble statue, and her diamond studs gleamed bright enough that I could see them from here.

Even the diamond on her finger appeared to wink at me as it caught the light.

I looked back to Jase again and froze. He was staring right at me, and he was no longer smiling.

Shit.

I turned my head away and cleared my throat as I picked up the pen and tried to concentrate.

I knew it. He wasn't getting a divorce. He never said he was, and I wasn't surprised.

I wasn't. I knew this would happen.

I blinked, refocusing and bending my head to my task. Name, address, references, work history . . .

I couldn't work at a restaurant where he brought his wife, could I? It would make us both uncomfortable. It had only been a few weeks since I'd moved into the house, and while my divorce was well on its way, we hadn't discussed his marriage at all.

He was married. He wasn't getting a divorce. Wise up, Kat.

"What are you doing here?" a voice demanded at my side. His tone was quiet but with an edge as if I were a child who'd stayed up past my bedtime.

I tensed and glanced up, seeing him stand at the empty bar, several feet away from me. Enough to appear as if he wasn't speaking to me and we didn't know each other.

"I can't be here?" I challenged, starting to print my information on the form.

"Is that an application?"

But before I could answer, the bartender approached. "Can I help you, sir?"

"GlenDronach," he ordered. "Neat."

The bartender walked away, and I continued my work, stealing a glance at the table and seeing his wife still talking to the older man.

"A job?" Jase asked. "Kat, if you need more money—"

"I don't need more money," I shot out under my breath. "Jesus."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."



I calmed my temper and kept my voice low. “I wanted to take classes during the day, so I’m looking for an evening job.”

He moved a few inches closer. “You shouldn’t get an evening job,” he told me. “If you go to school and work, Jared will never see you. And if you work nights, when am I supposed to spend time with you?”

The bartender approached again, and Jase straightened as he accepted his drink.

“I’ll have them add it to your dinner bill, Mr. Caruthers,” he said, glancing between us as I put my head back down.

“Thank you.”

When the bartender was gone, I peeled my tongue off the roof of my mouth, growing bolder.

“Tell her you’re taking your son to the park and come over to my house,” I replied sarcastically. “Our boys can play while we screw upstairs.”

He slammed his drink down, making my pulse quicken. “Knock it off.”

“Just go back to your dinner,” I bit out under my breath and then looked to the bartender. “Excuse me, may I have a rum and Coke, please?”

“Coming up.”

I didn’t like Jase making demands on how my life would go. He was getting what he wanted. What did he care?

And for that matter, what did I care?

“I don’t want you drinking alone. You’re upset.”

“I’m not upset.”

I was jealous.

I pushed the paper and pen away and grabbed my purse. “I’ll be right back,” I told the bartender.

I hurried to the other side of the restaurant and down the hallway, toward the restrooms. But before I could escape, Jase caught my arm and spun me around, backing me into a dark corner.

“I’m sorry.”

I snickered, stuffing the pen in my purse. “The first of many apologies, I’m sure.”

So this was going to be my life. Would it be worth it? Up until a few weeks ago I hated my life, and I struggled, but I liked who I was. Now, everything was the complete opposite.

How does one man make that happen?

“Is this how it’s going to be?” he challenged. “We’re going to run into each other in public from time to time, Kat. You have to be able to handle this until I get everything sorted out. I will do right by you. I promise.”

I tipped my chin up, steeling myself. “She’s beautiful.”

“Don’t.”

“I should’ve known she’d be beautiful,” I went on, laughing at myself. “Your car, your suits . . . You like to put on a nice sheen for everyone, don’t you? So they don’t see how much you like to play in the dirt.” And then I cocked my head at him. “Do you have sex with her?”

He stiffened, his eyes like blue fire.

“Can I have sex with someone else then?” I asked, trying to sound innocent. “Someone to keep me entertained when you’re not around?”

His jaw flexed as he regarded me. “I wouldn’t if I were you.”

I stared into his eyes until my own burned, and I couldn’t look at him anymore. What was I doing? My life was about me and my son, and now, as the days went on, it was increasingly about him.

Jared had to be in bed, because Jase was coming over. I couldn't date men and bring them to the home another man paid for. Sometimes I waited for hours for him to show up, and sometimes he never did. I couldn't call him at work, and I couldn't call him at night. I couldn't leave messages, and he couldn't take me out in Shelburne Falls.

How was I supposed to be important to him when we weren't growing into anything more than what we were?

"She wasn't real to me before," I said calmly. "She's real now. You take her out, she has your name . . ." I raised my eyes, meeting his. "I didn't want to be this woman. The stupid girl from the wrong side of the tracks, thinking her rich lover was going to save her from the trailer park. I didn't want you, and then when I did, I didn't want strings, and you've bent me every time I tried to resist. Guys like you never leave your wives, and I'm an asshole for wanting you to." A thousand pinpricks hit my throat, and I had to pause so I wouldn't cry.

"No." I nodded. "We fuck, you pay the bills. That's really what our arrangement is, isn't it?"

"That's not how it is," he implored, taking my face in his hands. "I will leave her."

"If that were true, you would've done it already. And how fucking awful am I if I want you to do that to her?"

"It was going to happen with or without you," he said, holding my gaze. "The state of my marriage isn't your fault."

I wanted to believe that. But this was a slippery slope.

There was a thin line between an affair being easy or it being disastrous. If you had two people who wanted sex or companionship, a little variety, per se, and you both had a lot to lose, then you had a mutual understanding of what was expected. But . . . and here's where shit often hit the fan . . . someone inevitably fell in love.

The only man, other than my son, who my life revolved around was Jase. I, on the other hand, wasn't the only woman in his life.

“If I’d met you first, this wouldn’t be an issue,” Jase told me. “You’re the one I want. My father owns the law firm I work in, Kat. If I divorce Maddie, I lose the job and everything I’ve worked for. We just have bad timing. We’ll get through this.” He rubbed a circle on my cheek. “When I make partner, I can do whatever I want.”

I turned my eyes away, knowing what I should do. Don’t they all say that? “Just wait. We’ll be together, I promise. Just a little more time.”

If only I could just enjoy him and not be feeling what I’m starting to feel. I squeezed my eyes shut, holding the tears back.

“When it’s just us,” he whispered, his breath on my lips, “alone and warm, and I’m holding you, that’s who I am, Kat. That’s who I look forward to being when I’m leaving work and I can’t get to you quick enough.” He kissed me, soft and gentle. “Stay with me. I can’t lose you.”

I shook my head, trying to not to let his words get to me, but I started crying anyway. I dipped my head into his chest, slipping my hands inside his jacket and hating the way I was starting to bend again.

If I trusted him—just gave him a chance—what did I have to lose?

Someone cleared their throat nearby, and I pulled away, taking in a quick breath. “Excuse me,” a male voice said.

Jase stood up straight, breathing nervously and turned around. The man standing behind him was the one who had been seated at the table with Jase and his wife. He was older, and his blue eyes shifted casually between Jase and me.

“Be discreet,” he told Jase and then looked at me, tipping his head. “Young lady.”

And I caught the shadow of a smile as he disappeared into the men’s room.

Jase's body went stiff and he pulled away, adjusting his tie and jacket, not looking at me.

Was that his father?

"Go home, okay?" he asked, his tone curt. "I'll give you what you need. You're not working nights."

And then, without waiting for me to respond, he left me there, making his way back into the restaurant.

Jesus. It was all about him.

His demands, his life, his schedule, his pace . . . Was I happier than I was before?

I brushed my hair away from my face and fixed my dress, knowing the answer without even thinking about it. Yeah, I was happy. When he was around.

But when he wasn't, the lows were lower than they were with Thomas, because of one simple fact . . . I never loved Thomas.

I thought I had, but if what I was starting to feel for Jase was any indication, then he had the potential to hurt me a lot more than my ex.

Walking back out, I stopped at the bar to pay for my drink and quickly downed it, closing my eyes as the warmth of the alcohol coursed through my veins and coated my stomach.

Jase passed behind me, walking his wife out of the restaurant and helping her into her coat without sparing me a glance. But I caught her eye, a fraction of a moment longer than I should have. Had she seen Jase and me talking at the bar? Did she feel the tension on him I could?

They left and I sat down, disobeying orders. How long would I wait for him? A year? Two? Forever?

I wanted to be with him, but I was starting to fear that I was holding back for fear of missing out on his promise to me. What if he left her? I had to try, right?

But there were no answers. Only silence. The alcohol smoothed out the edges, and the tightness in my muscles began to ease. The worrying ache in my head dissipated, and the storm of emotions and questions brewing in my mind started to look like the picture through a telescope. Far, far away.

“Can I have another, please?” I asked the bartender.

While I waited for Jase, I may as well enjoy myself. Hopefully, I wasn’t missing out more than I was waiting for, though.

• • •

I close the book and let my head fall back against the headboard. I’m glad there wasn’t more sex, but I was too curious not to keep reading. So many things no one ever told me.

My mom shouldn’t have waited for him. She should’ve left his ass until he got his shit together. She was right. If he wanted her, then he wouldn’t have been able to wait, right?

But then I remember that this is just a book. They’re married now, happy, and I don’t know for sure that this is about them. Couldn’t it be a coincidence about the names, Fall Away Lane where Jared’s and Jax’s houses are located, Lockes-on-the-Bluff where Madoc takes his mom to dinner every time she’s in town . . . ?

If it is real, who could’ve written it? Who would know all this stuff about my parents?

And who sent it, believing I needed to have it?

*Hopefully, I wasn’t missing out more than I was waiting for, though.*

I can’t help but think that this is true for a lot of us.

“Quinn!” I hear Dylan call from downstairs.

Shit, she must be back already. I hadn’t realized how much time had passed.

“Coming!” I shout.

Stuffing the book in my satchel, I check my hair in the mirror and run out of my bedroom.

Passing my parents’ room, I stop and think, remembering my mom’s box of keepsakes in her closet. I remember being enamored of her journal when I was a kid, but she wouldn’t let me read it.

If this book is true, the person who wrote it has to be close to at least one of my parents. They had to get the story somewhere.

Cracking open the door, I creep inside, knowing they’re not home yet, but Addie could be lurking around somewhere, too.

I close the door and dash into my mom’s closet, walking past the clothes and shoe racks, the handbags and jewelry. I loved playing in here as a kid. Trying on her things and pretending I was as sophisticated and beautiful. I kind of like finding out she didn’t always have it together. That she was far from perfect.

Taking down the white box on the shelf, I dig through it until I find her black journal underneath her old yearbook.

Holding it in my hands, the nerves under my skin are firing so hard I almost feel sick. I don’t want to read this. It’s private, and I love my parents. I don’t need to know all their secrets, because it doesn’t change how much they mean to each other and me.

But someone sent the book to me for a reason.

I absently fan the pages, not ready to look, but the book automatically falls open in the middle and I widen my eyes in shock.

“Oh, my God.”

Sitting between the pages is a small pile of one-hundred-dollar bills and a business card. An old tattered one, yellowed from age, and it has my father’s name on it.

I count out the money. Four hundred. The same amount  
Jase gave Kat for changing the oil in his car.



## Chapter 6

We sail down the highway, the radio blasting with Madonna's "Like a Prayer," and I have to laugh as I look over at Dylan.

She's bouncing against the back of her seat, singing at full volume.

"This song's like really old, you know?" I shout, teasing her.

She smiles, punching the stick shift into fifth. I grab onto the safety bar, because she freaks me out when she drives.

"It's sexy, though," she taunts, turning down the volume. "Did you know it's about a blow job?"

I shoot my eyes over to her. "It is not!"

She laughs, nodding. "It is! Listen." And she starts singling along with Madonna, "'I'm down on my knees, I want to take you there.'" She eyeballs me. "See!"

I look away, turning it over in my head as my entire childhood shatters. How many times have I danced to this around my house? In front of my parents?!

Squeezing my eyes shut, I bury my face in my hands and practically growl. My mom is right. My dad shelters me, and now my younger relatives are teaching me shit. *Awesome.*

"Just . . . drop me at Jax's," I blurt out, changing the subject. "I need to talk to Juliet."

"Are you sure?"

I unfasten my seat belt as she makes a small detour, turning onto Fall Away Lane. "Yeah, I'll catch a ride with them. Don't worry. I'll be there."

"Okay, see you soon then," she says with a hint of threat in her voice, like I'd better be there or else. I know she's nervous about her first race tonight. Even though she's been on that track and many others her father has taken her to her entire life.

Walking up to Jax and Juliet's house, I slow my steps as I take in the white two-story with black shutters, looking at it with new eyes now.

My father bought this house. I wonder if my brothers knew that. No wonder my mother never took Jax's money for it. It wouldn't have been right. My father gave it to her as a gift, and she passed it on as a gift.

If my dad had never bought the house, Jax and Juliet wouldn't live here now. Jared might never have met Tate, at least not until high school, and Hawke, Dylan, and James might never have been born without all those events that brought everyone together. It's incredible how something that seems so insignificant can alter the lives of so many. How our family started out so unsure, but now, here we are. Practically a clan.

I walk into the house without knocking, which is pretty much standard in our family. There's so much coming and going, everyone knows not to walk around naked.

Making my way toward the kitchen, I stop when I hear Jax's voice, then I notice Hawke at my side. He must've come in behind me.

He's sweating, wearing only black shorts and a backpack with no shirt. "I'm home!" he calls, rounding the bannister. "I'm gonna shower, and I'll meet you at the track, Dad."

"Ok, hurry up," Jax tells him. "It's Dylan's night."

Hawke heads upstairs, and I continue into the kitchen, seeing Jax come toward me.

"Hey. What's up?" He plants a kiss on my forehead.

"I just need to talk to Juliet. Are you riding separate?"

"As usual." He grins. "See you there." And then he walks around me, heading out.

Juliet is at the sink, using the hose to spray water over a plant, and I stand and watch her for a moment.

I admire all of my sisters-in-law: Tate for her strength and the way she stands up for herself, and Fallon for the way she doesn't bend and sticks to her convictions. But Juliet is a little different.

I always looked up to her, because I liked how girly she was. Or is. She flaunts her femininity.

She's beautiful, and despite the fact that she teaches high school English and Literature and writes young adult books on the side, she never gives into pressure to fit a mold or hide her personality to meet an expectation.

I love how she wears her personality. The big necklaces that are a perfect contradiction to her jean shorts and T-shirt, the heels she wears with skinny jeans, the lip gloss the color of cotton candy . . . all of those things were a very big deal to an eight-year-old who looked at this woman and saw glamour.

But somehow, I've never really stopped idolizing her. Not even a little. I like her style, and as I grew up, I started wanting to be more like her. Someone sexy that drives my man wild. She's carefree and walks with confidence.

Sometimes I come over just to look in her closet and try on the soft, flowing shirts and Jimmy Choos.

"Hi," I finally say, coming to sit down at the kitchen table.

She turns her head, her green eyes sparkling with a smile. "Well, hey. This is a nice surprise. I don't feel like I see you enough."

I take off my bag and set it on the table. "It always smells like cookies in here. No wonder Jax keeps you around."

She snorts, carrying the plant across the kitchen to set on the back porch. "Yeah, he says he keeps me around because I'm hot."

Whatever. Jax likes to joke, but they're perfect together, and he knows it. Just like Jared and Tate and Madoc and Fallon.

"So what's up?" She dusts off her hands on her jean shorts.

“Nothing. Just thought I’d catch a ride with you tonight.”

“Sounds good,” she says. “I’ll be ready in a few.”

Jax and Jared usually go early to help set up and organize the spectators, while Tate and Juliet come separately, so they have a car to bring the kids home early and get them in bed.

Juliet only has Hawke, but she and Jax took in lots of foster kids over the years. They didn’t have anyone staying with them now, though. A fact that, I think, Hawke enjoys. He’s an only child who hardly ever gets to enjoy being an only child.

“So . . .” I feel my heartbeat pick up pace. “Are you writing anything right now?”

I know what I want to ask her, and I feel tempted to spit it out, but I’m not sure I really want to know, either. So I ease myself into it.

If the person who sent the book wanted to be known, they would’ve included a return address.

But I have to know who sent it.

She finishes wrapping up their leftovers from dinner and puts them in the fridge. “I’m working on something. Another part of the same series,” she explains. “It’s hard to find time to write, though, and this summer shouldn’t allow much more time.”

Juliet writes fantasy when she’s not teaching—it’s a series about teens who live in a postapocalyptic society where ancient warrior regimes have taken over.

However, she and Jax finally got their summer camp open up at Black Hawk Lake, so her time off from teaching wouldn’t really be time off. She’ll be busy all summer, which will leave little time for writing.

I trace the grain of the wood of the table and ask hesitantly, “Have you ever . . .” I look up at her. “Like, written romance or anything?”

She stops what she's doing and looks at me. I suddenly feel awkward.

But she shakes her head. "No," she replies quietly, looking away again. "Never had much interest. Why do you ask?"

I shrug. "No reason."

But disappointment weighs on me. She's the only writer I know.

I draw in a deep breath and stand up. *Screw it*. It's Dylan's night. I'll finish the book, because I can't not, but it's almost time for some fun.

"Can I check out your closet?"

She shoots me a very happy look. She doesn't have any daughters, so I know she enjoys being able to do girly things with Dylan and me.

"Have at it," she says. "We're about the same size now, so feel free to borrow something." And then whisks past me, whispering, "Something that will piss off your brothers."

I let out a laugh and grab my bag to head upstairs.

*Hell yeah.*

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*Jase . . .*

I climbed the stairs, hearing my father's coughing break up the silence in the otherwise quiet penthouse. The skyscrapers of Chicago loomed outside the windows behind me, blurred in the rain spilling down the glass, and I passed pictures on the walls of all of our great orchestrated family moments. My parents decided to stay here at their apartment in the city, close to the doctors, when we found out my father was dying.

Go figure. I was the one who smoked, but he got lung cancer.

I pushed open his bedroom door and stepped inside. The home nurse was leaning over his bed, holding up his cup as he

struggled to drink, and then she put it down and pulled up his covers.

She walked over to me, carrying a bloodstained hand towel and whispering, “He’s close to the end, I’m afraid.”

I cast him a glance, taking in his frail hands gripping the sheet, his sunken cheeks and chapped lips, and his withered body, so small and thin. His white pajamas looked like a sheet thrown over a skeleton.

My father has always been larger than life to me. I never felt close to him, but as a kid, he was still a god. *Now look at him.*

He started coughing again, and I nodded at the nurse, brushing past her to head over to his side of the bed.

I reached down and wrapped an arm around his convulsing body, trying to support him as he hunched over and hacked. “Here, let me.”

“Stop it!” he barked, slapping at my arms. “Don’t act like you wouldn’t rather be anywhere else.”

Jesus. I released him and stood, running a hand through my hair as I watched his body shake and fight for air. He pulled away the towel, and there was more blood. I clenched my jaw, suddenly unnerved. This wasn’t my father.

He fell back on his pillows again, breathing hard, and I turned away, taking off my suit jacket. I tossed it on a chair and loosened my tie, taking a deep breath and trying to face him.

I’d barely been around to visit since he was confined to his bed a few weeks ago. The disease hit him fast and hard, and I didn’t know why it was difficult to see him like this. I wasn’t sure I would even miss him, after all.

Was it just hard to muster empathy? I didn’t really know. I just knew that I was confused.

“Your mother is off shopping,” he said, looking up at me and sounding short of breath. “For a trip to Italy she’s planning

to help herself get over my death.”

He started laughing, his voice thick with phlegm, and I saw blood coating the inside of his lips.

Dorian Gray. That’s who he reminded me of. All my life, he seemed like a young man, living large, but now . . . the weight of a life’s worth of consequences descended at once, his true character showing all over him. Decrepit, ugly, weak . . .

He was dying horribly. And alone. My mother was counting the days, and I couldn’t say I blamed her.

“I wanted more, Jason.” He looked up at me, his eyes now desperate. “I thought I would be more. The friends, the parties, the meetings, the power and money . . . you think it means something, but look at me,” he pleaded, drawing in shallow breaths. “I’m dying alone. Everything will carry on, and you start to realize that, while your name may last awhile, you’re replaceable. I’m almost already forgotten.”

I leaned down and pulled the cover back up. “That’s not true.”

But he grabbed my hand, stopping me. His cold fingers curled around my fist, and I stared at our hands. The same size, the same nails, the same wide knuckles . . .

“Do you love me?” he asked quietly.

I raised my eyes hesitantly, staring into a reflection of my own thirty years from now. Will I be asking Madoc that same question? Will I have to?

When I don’t answer, my father lets go of my hand and looks away. “No one’s here. And when they do show up, it’s a lie.”

“Do you care?”

He shot his eyes over to me again, the despair evident. “I don’t want to die alone,” he admitted. “Your mother won’t miss me. And all the women over all the years . . . they gave

me nothing that lasted. I ruined my marriage. I ruined my family.”

I sat down, a ten-ton weight sitting on my shoulders. Burying my head in my hands, I felt his words curl their way through my head.

I wasn't him. Kat was the only woman. I didn't run around town. She was special. Madoc would understand. We won't be here in thirty years, Madoc hating me for never being there for him, choosing whores over our family, and hurting his mother.

I couldn't do this anymore.

My father was dying, and afterward I would finally be free to determine the course of my own life. A life with Kat, and our kids, including Madoc.

“Dad, I'm in love with Kat,” I told him. “I can't give her up . . .”

“It doesn't matter,” he cut me off. “You'll fail her, too.”

I stared at him, his words from over the years still so ingrained in my head. Failure is a choice that easily becomes a habit, he would always say.

And doubt took root. What if I married Kat? What if it failed? What if the whole reason I latched onto her in the first place was because I was simply weak and greedy? Just like him.

Where would Madoc live if Maddie and I divorced? Would he hate me? Would Maddie remarry and give him someone in his life who was worlds better than me?

“All that matters is Madoc,” he went on. “Don't disappoint him. Don't hurt him.”

My son. A child who was starting to notice his parents and, not only how they love him, but how they love each other. I already knew he loves her more. And why wouldn't he?

“Your son is the true love of your life, Jason. When it's you lying here, you'll want to know that you survive in him. That



he'll keep you alive. That he'll mourn you.”

I blinked rapidly, turning away, so my father didn't see the tears in my eyes.

“Nothing is more important than him,” he whispered, his wheezing growing more labored. “I wish I had been a better father. I wish I could undo everything I've done to make you hate me.”

He reached out a hand off the side of the bed, fighting to breathe. I stared down at it, knowing I should take it. Knowing he needed me. There was no one else, after all.

But this wasn't us. It was never us. He denied me love and affection all my life. When I had the need, he didn't have the will. Now that he had the need, I found that I just wasn't willing to fake affection for him.

His hand fell to the side, limp and empty when I didn't take it. “I wish . . . ,” he gasped. “I wish you loved me.”

## Chapter 7

*Kat . . .*

Pushing open the screen door, I spotted Jared, flying down the street on his bike. Tate stood up on his pegs behind him, holding on to his shoulders. My heart raced every time they did that. I glanced next door, seeing her dad, James, mowing the lawn and at the same time keeping an eye on them as well.

“Jared?” I shouted, slipping on my heel. “Come inside!”

I heard the squeak of his brakes, and Tate broke out in laughter as he swerved side to side, trying to stop.

She and her father had just moved in a few months ago, and I was so happy Jared had a kid right next door to play with. Even if she was a girl—and he pouted about that at first—they were practically inseparable now.

“I don’t want to come in!” he argued.

But I just shook my head, knowing that was coming. He constantly argued. “I have to leave.”

“Then leave.”

I closed my eyes, groaning under my breath.

At five, he’d been a handful. At eight, a little bit of a nightmare. And now at ten? He was practically unstoppable.

I charged down the steps and across the yard, seeing Tate jump off the bike, because she, at least, still respected adults. “Stop with the attitude,” I bit out. “I have things to do, so I’m going to drop you at Deena’s. Get your backpack.”

“I don’t want to go to her house!” he yelled. “Tate doesn’t have to go to a babysitter!”

“Because Tate’s dad is home,” I argued, and I suddenly noticed the lawn mower had stopped.

Since it was summer, the kids didn’t have school, but Jared was still too young to stay home alone.

“Now,” I gritted out.

“You’re not even working today!”

“He can stay with us, Kat.”

I turned to see Tate’s dad coming into the street, wiping his hands on his shop cloth.

Well, that would be easy, wouldn’t it? And under normal circumstances, I wouldn’t have a problem with it. He ate at their house at least once a week already and even spent the night a couple of times.

But no, Jared needed to learn how to follow directions.

“That’s okay. Thank you.” I evened out my voice, trying to calm down.

But when I turned back to Jared, he and Tate were gone, speeding down the street again.

“Jared!” I yelled again.

I looked at my watch. Damn it. I should’ve left a half hour ago. I wanted to miss the traffic.

“Honestly, Kat,” James spoke up again, “it helps me out. They entertain each other, and I can get some work done. I was going to take Tate out for pizza later. They’ll have fun, and he can spend the night.”

I looked back to Jared, following him with my eyes and wishing he’d stay away from the corner like I’d told him. What if a car sped around there?

I closed my eyes and let out a breath. My nerves were shot.

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” I asked, finally giving in. I couldn’t tackle my son today. If he was happier here, let him stay here.

James just smiled, another instance of his easy demeanor. “We’ll see you in the morning.”

He walked away, and I dropped my head for a moment, feeling defeated. Why couldn’t I fall for a nice guy like him?

One who was single, an excellent dad who stopped everything for his daughter, and seemed to understand so much without my saying anything.

I was pretty sure he knew my story, and we'd barely talked. It was the look in his eyes sometimes.

He was the type who wouldn't interfere and tell me I was neglecting my kid. He wouldn't tell me that if I hadn't gone out with my friends last night, I wouldn't be tired and hungover today. He wouldn't tell me how to raise my child.

He was simply there, picking up all the slack I left hanging.

Even if I were interested in him, though, I didn't believe he was any more available than Jason. James's wife had passed away last spring, and I got the impression he'd continue wearing his wedding ring for quite some time yet.

I made it into the city around four, and I'd dressed semi-causal, wearing a short black sleeveless dress, layered on the bottom half. I'd also left my hair down, kinky with the natural curl Jase liked, and all pushed to one side, over my left shoulder. The makeup was minimal, but I made sure to wear red lipstick and the perfume he liked. We were supposed to be going to Movie in the Park tonight, and he was taking care of the picnic and blanket.

Over time, we'd gotten into a routine. He knew what time Jared was supposed to be in bed, and he'd call me before he arrived to make sure the coast was clear. Sometimes I met him at his suite at the Waldorf in Chicago, but now he had an apartment there, so we used the suite less. He even let me decorate the apartment. To make it ours.

I could call him at work or at certain times when I knew he'd be alone, and sometimes I saw him a few times a week, and other times I wouldn't see him for a month. It sounded terrible when I put in into words or tried to explain it to Deena, but the strange thing was . . . it had become normal. Somewhere along the way my expectations had shifted.

They'd lowered, and my hopes had settled at a more realistic level.

Since his father's death several years ago, his career had taken off, and he was at the top of his game. I took solace in the knowledge that "he needed me." He loved me, right? So we stole our moments where we could, and when it was just us, everything was perfect.

And someday, hopefully soon, Madoc would be old enough to understand the divorce and accept seeing his dad with someone new.

I'd gotten my accounting degree years ago, I held down a decent job, and I had a lot to be grateful for. He'd given me a lot, and I knew I shouldn't feel bad about demanding more from him over the years, but I did. Why did I feel like I owed him?

Deena would ask why I stayed. Why I kept running back to him and putting up with it instead of finding a man who wanted only me. Why did I let myself be used in a way that made me so miserable?

And I always had to correct her. I wasn't miserable.

I was deliriously happy.

Because I was irrevocably in love with him. I'd rather be unhappy ninety percent of the time just so I could feel what I felt with him the other ten percent of the time.

I'd rather leave my son with sitters to be available for Jase on a moment's notice, only to drink myself into an oblivion to chase away the guilt after he'd left.

I'd rather be lonely and feel like a piece of shit every day only to have it all wash away as soon as he kissed me.

That was the sickness. My entire life revolved around him, because I was a woman in love in a horrible situation. He was like a drug that I couldn't give up—everything depended on getting my next hit. Unfortunately, though, I needed the hits to

come faster, and when they didn't, I soothed myself with alcohol.

My God, how I'd changed. Where was the girl who taunted him in the repair shop that night? The one who spit his intentions back in his face?

Walking into his office building, I took the elevator up to the twenty-sixth floor and texted James, telling him to tell Jared I'd see him in the morning and that I loved him.

Jared.

I closed my eyes, letting out a heavy breath, because I wanted to cry thinking about him. He was so smart. He was starting to catch onto me. How much longer before I'd pushed him to the side so often I wouldn't be able to pick him back up?

Thomas would've been a horrible father, but if I'd stayed in that dump, surviving and fighting, because I had no choice, maybe Jared would've had a better mother than the one he has now.

I stepped off the elevator and walked down the marble corridor to Jase's office. I wasn't sure what he told his assistant when I came by, but she didn't give me curious or judgmental glances, so I guessed he was rather good at lying, in and out of the courtroom. Rounding the corner, I quickly stopped and stepped back, shielding myself behind the wall.

Shit. What was she doing here?

I edged back toward the corner again, trying to figure out what I should do. Jase and Madeline, his wife, stood outside his office, in front of the receptionist's desk, chatting and smiling. A boy was with them, and I knew it was Madoc, even though I'd never met him. He looked exactly like his father.

Jase was blocking his door, not inviting them in, so they were either on their way out or he was trying to get them to leave. He knew I was coming, after all.

“Mom’s dragging me into chick shops,” Madoc complained. “Help.”

But his mom just laughed, lightly knocking him on the arm. “Don’t act like you don’t like shopping, kid. Besides, you need school clothes. No more uniforms next year.”

Jase smiled at both of them, his hands in his pocket and looking a little nervous. Yeah, I’ll bet you are.

I’d seen his wife several times over the years, in a restaurant or in the paper for some city project she was helping with. Sometimes on the street or in her car.

She wore a tight, gray sleeveless dress that fell to her knees and hugged every curve. Her heels were a dark pink, and her tan was flawless. Her hair was cut shoulder-length and styled with big curls, and as every time I saw her, she was perfect, right down to the Gucci handbag.

Kind of what I thought I would be like if I ever grew up. I straightened, looking down at my dress that seemed so simple and my childish flats.

I wondered what Jase saw in me. I looked okay, but I didn’t carry myself like that.

I guessed they were in town to shop, especially since Jase said Madoc had talked his way out of attending any more Catholic school and would be allowed to attend public next year. He needed regular clothes, probably.

“Can you meet us for dinner?” his wife asked.

But Jase just let out a sigh, looking immediately uncomfortable. “I wish I could, honey, but I’ll be buried until morning. You may as well head home without me after you’re done shopping. I’ll probably just stay here tonight.”

I couldn’t see her face, but she was silent and I saw her head dip a little. My stomach churned.

“Okay,” she replied quietly. “We’ll see you when we see you then.”

And then she put her hand on Madoc's back, both of them turning and walking my way.

I immediately put my head down, digging in my purse for my phone. She passed by me as I pretended to dial a number, but I know she turned to look at me.

Placing the phone to my ear, I acted like I was on a call, while she and her son waited for the elevator. But inevitably, the pull got to me. I flashed my eyes over to her and found her staring at me. My heart began beating faster, and I watched as her eyes fell quickly down my body and back up to my face, before turning away.

She knew.

And she just stared ahead, her chin trembling as I watched her and Madoc walk into the elevator.

I'd been wondering what Jase saw in me over her, and she'd probably just wondered the same thing. We were both wondering why we weren't good enough.

I stayed in the hallway long after the number on the elevator had descended to one, and I knew she was gone.

This wasn't working. It never worked, and it would never end. She was miserable, and her son wasn't an idiot. He knew something was wrong.

I was miserable, and my son wasn't an idiot, either. He knew something was wrong.

The only person happy here was Jase, because he got the best of both worlds. And I was only happy when I saw him.

Which was next to never.

And for so long, I'd accepted it. Because I didn't think I deserved something more.

Thomas and my parents wouldn't or couldn't be there for me, my friends had their own problems, and I was trying to raise a kid on my own. I never thought I'd have all the things I have now. I was supposed to be grateful and not selfish, right?



So I let him steer us, and I rarely made demands, believing that his stated concern about wanting to make sure Madoc was old enough to understand a divorce was legitimate.

It wasn't. Deep down I knew it was just a way to hold me off.

Tucking my phone back in my bag, I walked into his office, his assistant waving me through. She must've known I was coming.

With a steady hand, I slowly swung his office door open and stepped in, closing it behind me.

Jase stood across the room, staring out the windows, but turned when he heard me enter. Immediately, his shoulders relaxed and a relieved smile crossed his face, looking like a small weight had lifted. He loosened his tie, drawing attention to his neck, and desire flared up inside me. It was my favorite part of his body. Soft but toned, and kissing him there drove him wild.

“Hi,” he greeted softly, walking toward me.

His eyes never left mine, and this was the part where I always lost my resolve—when Jase looked at me, after all this time, like I was still that teenage girl in the garage. Fascination with a hint of lust like I was the only thing that existed in his world.

It was a pretty lie. I pushed the feelings down.

“I thought she didn't come to your office,” I said, remaining by the door.

He slowed to a pause and watched me, realization crossing his face. He knew I'd probably passed her in the hall.

Giving me a closed-mouthed, contrite smile, he walked toward me, opening his arms. “You look beautiful.”

He leaned in for a kiss, but I quickly turned my head away so that his lips brushed my cheek instead.

He pulled back and stared down at me. “What's wrong?”

I adjusted the bag hanging on my arm, unable to look at him. If I looked at him, I'd start tearing up and then he'd soothe me and we'd be back where we started.

"I came to tell you I'm not going to be at the apartment tonight," I replied. "I'm going home where I belong."

He remained still, his hands frozen on my arms as he gazed at me, probably having no doubt what was happening.

We'd been through this before. So many times.

Sometimes it was him. *"I love you, but the guilt is too much."* *"I can't do this to you anymore."* *"My kid will hate me like I hate my father."* *"How do we build a relationship from where we've started?"*

But within days we were in each other's arms again.

Other times it was me. *"Why are you such a coward?"* *"I need a life of my own."* *"I hate who I am with you."*

And within a month and no matter whom I tried to date, I couldn't shake Jase. I never could.

"So you came all the way to Chicago to tell me that?" he charged, his tone turning clipped. "That you're going home? To the home I bought you, you mean?"

I glued my teeth together and froze, thinking that if I didn't say anything I would be safe. For at least a moment.

He leaned his head down further, invading my space and trying to catch my eyes. "Hmmm?"

A knot lodged in my throat, because I was afraid. I could walk out of here, go home, and wake up tomorrow, probably feeling worlds lighter having rid myself of him. But then days would pass, I'd get lonely, he'd start calling or coming by after trying to give me my space, and the emotions, the longing, and the fucking memories of how good we were together in the good times would make me give in and agree to be his again. We always came back to each other.

He breathed out a nasty laugh. "Give me a break," he said, calling my bluff as he walked away. "Get over here. Now."

I fisted my hands and stayed planted to the floor. If he'd been sweeter, maybe I would've gone to him. But now it was a matter of pride, and believe it or not, I still had a little of that left.

His jaw flexed, and his eyes burned when I didn't move.

"I don't fuck my wife anymore," he growled from across his office. "And you know nothing about my responsibilities and obligations. You have no idea what goes on in my head, Kat. Now get over here."

I shook my head, still not leaving but still not budging.

"Now!"

"No!" I lashed out, glaring at him. "It's over! I'm sick of your shit!"

"Oh, Kat's mad again," he mocked, tossing out a lazy smile. "Okay, how much will this cost?" He pulled out his billfold and started throwing money into the air. "Twenty-forty-sixty," he counted and then stopped. "Oh, I'm sorry. You like hundreds, don't you?" And he began tossing more bills out, reminding me of the day at the repair shop when I'd taken an extra hundred out of his wallet.

"You son of a bitch!" I shouted, running for him and throwing out my hands, hitting him in the face a few times.

He caught my arms, holding the wrists so hard they burned.

"It's not over," he ordered, seething in my face as he backed me up. "It doesn't end until I say it does."

And then I fell back on the couch; his body came down on top of me. I let out a cry, but it was muffled by the weight of him on my chest.

"You don't need me here," he said, touching my head and forcing himself between my legs. "And you don't feel me here." He touched my chest over my heart, his breath falling

on my lips. “This is where you want me.” His hand slipped between us down between my legs, rubbing me where I was already wet. “I’m going to have it tomorrow, and the next day, in my car, here in my office, at the Waldorf in our room where the men in my family fuck their pretty mistresses, and you’re not going to keep me off you, Kat, because you’re mine.”

I shook and cried as he kissed me, slowly trailing his mouth across my cheek and biting my lips.

“That smart mouth,” he whispered, “and that soft skin that doesn’t taste like anything but you.” He gripped my panties in his hand, and I gasped as he tore them off my body.

I squeezed my eyes shut. Stop. No.

But the words never left my lips. They never did, because I loved him. I always wanted him.

He unfastened his belt and pants and pushed inside me, finding me just as wet as I always was. I let out a cry, feeling him fill me.

“You can say whatever you want”—he thrust harder, stretching me and filling me and making my knees bend up to get him deeper—“but you can’t give me up any more than I can give you up. It will never be over.”

He layered our lips, my bottom one between both of his like he always did, both of us breathing and panting, doing the only thing we knew how to do. The only thing he wanted from me.

I stopped crying, and everything turned numb as he thrust into me and panted, and I moaned as we both came.

This is what we were. It was all we’d ever be. There would never be anything more.

He lay on top of me, his chest rising and falling on mine, and I couldn’t hear anything. All around me was like white noise, and as much as I tuned my ears, I couldn’t hear or see what was next. I couldn’t see tomorrow. I couldn’t see Jared or me. There was nothing.

I squeezed my eyes shut, the sobs in my stomach building and tightening until I felt like I was going to scream.

I'd dropped the ball. I'd given him too much power over me.

I barely existed anymore.

My head hung to the side, and I pushed out from underneath him. I sunk to the floor, my torn panties lying beside me.

"I love you," I whispered, staring at nothing ahead of me. "But please stay away from me. Please."

His voice was quiet and strained. "I can't."

I dropped my head, my chest shaking and tears spilling over. Grabbing my purse from where it had fallen, I ran to the door. But before I could open it, he was up and off the couch, and his body was behind mine, caging me in and keeping me from leaving.

I cried, turning around and feeling nothing but despair. "Look at me," I pleaded. "Look what you've done to me."

His eyes were turning red, and I saw tears pooling. He swallowed, finally looking like he had no idea what to say me. "I never wanted to hurt you."

I stared at him, holding his eyes. Could he see how I looked? Did he care that I was suffering?

"Then let me go," I told him. "Please let me go. If you love me at all . . ."

I turned to leave, but he slammed his hand against the door, his breath shaking his chest with each inhalation.

"Kat, please," he begged in a whisper. "Please don't do this."

I pulled the door open anyway, refusing to turn around and look at him. But I turned my head just enough for him to hear me.

“You said you were going to give me everything, and you didn’t. You can’t,” I charged. “I would’ve eventually gotten away from Thomas, but you?” Tears started falling again as pain filled my chest and my gut. “You’ve made a mess of me.”

## Chapter 8

*Kat . . .*

Charging through the school, my heels dug into the floors, their clacking echoing down the hallway as I made my way to the main office. This was the fourth time this year I'd been summoned to Jared's school either to take him home or to meet with the principal about his behavior.

Everything was fine before last summer. Or somewhat fine. I should never have let Thomas take him. Jared had been off the rails ever since, and I knew why, but he refused to let me help, and I was at my wits' end. Thank goodness that bastard was in jail now.

But even so, the damage was done, and my son was different. He was more like his father than ever now.

I barged through the heavy wooden door and entered the office, stopping and immediately scanning for Jared.

Seeing him and another boy sitting in the chairs along the wall, I couldn't help but lash out.

"Bullying?" I burst out. "I'm absolutely disgusted. What were you thinking?"

Jared stared ahead, looking bored and ignoring me.

"It wasn't bullying," someone grumbled, and I looked to the kid a couple of chairs down from him. "Josh Rutgers is such a baby."

I'd never seen the kid before, but I gathered he and Jared were in this together.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

He smiled, holding out a hand. "Madoc Caruthers. You're my brother's mother, huh?"

Brother's mother. Caruthers. "What?"

I took in the blond hair, the demanding blue eyes, the expensive shoes and brown leather jacket, the stylish roll to his jeans . . . *Oh, Christ.*

“Like, how old are you?” he asked, giving me a nice, long once-over that was completely inappropriate. “Were you ten when you had Jared?”

“Caruthers,” I repeated, ignoring his flirting as I walked over to the boys. “Is your father Jase Caruthers?”

“Yeah. You know him?”

“No,” I snapped and turned away, looking to Jared. “Get up.”

He rolled his eyes and stood up, following me up to the receptionist’s counter.

Shit. They were friends. How did I not know that?

Mrs. Bauer, the principal’s assistant, saw us and stopped what she was doing to approach. “The principal had to leave for a meeting,” she informed me. “But Jared’s suspended for three days. He’s responsible for staying caught up on his work while he’s gone. You need to sign this.”

She pulled out a paper and pushed it in front of me with a pen.

I picked up the pen and started scanning the document. “What happened exactly?”

“A guy was messing with Tatum Brandt,” Madoc answered, coming up to the counter to stand next to us. “So Jared and I sent him on his way.”

“The boy was merely asking her to the school carnival,” Mrs. Bauer clarified. “And these two proceeded to steal his clothes while he was in the shower and hang them on Miss Brandt’s locker with a very vulgar message written on the underpants.”

She said the last part in a horrified whisper, and I heard Madoc snort next to us, doubling over and laughing as I felt



Jared smile next to me.

I turned to him. “Why would you do that to Tate?”

“Because he likes her,” Madoc interjected.

“Shut. Up,” Jared growled.

Anger filled my chest, and I swallowed it down, because I knew it was exactly what Jared wanted. What was the matter with him? He lived for confrontation these days, and our arguments were a constant occurrence. I had no idea what to do with him.

The bottle of rum I had at home flashed in my mind, and I swallowed again, the dryness in my mouth like sand. I signed the paper quickly without even reading it.

I didn’t care. I just wanted to get out of here.

“Madoc,” a deep male voice called.

I froze. No, no, no . . .

Madoc turned around at my side. “Hey,” he replied in a casual tone. “I swear I didn’t do it.”

The pen shook in my hand, and I could feel the heat of his eyes on my back.

I hadn’t seen him in so long.

“Oh, of course not,” the man responded. “It’s never your fault.”

His voice was getting closer, and I closed my eyes for a moment, not wanting to turn around, but I knew there was no way I’d get out of here without him seeing.

In the five years since we’d ended things, a lot had changed.

But not enough. The anger still festered within me, time having healed nothing.

“Nope, never,” Madoc responded. “Everyone should have a kid like me.” And then he turned back around, winking at the middle-aged receptionist across the counter.

She scowled, tsking at him, and pushed another paper—I assumed for Jase to sign—forward. Madoc must be suspended, too.

“Just take them home,” she instructed. “Be back on Friday.”

I saw Jase’s black suit out of the corner of my eye as he stepped up to the counter, Madoc between us. He pulled the paper closer, as if reading it, but then I felt his eyes fall on me.

Damn it. I locked my jaw and steeled my eyes, so he wouldn’t see how nervous I was as I glanced over at him.

His eyes narrowed, and he seemed to stop breathing before quickly turning away, picking up the pen to sign the paper.

Yeah, I wasn’t expecting this either, College Boy.

We’d done a great job of avoiding each other the past few years. I knew which pubs to stay out of, and he knew to avoid High Street, since that was where I worked.

And even though I was no longer dirt poor and struggling, I made sure not to frequent fancy restaurants or the country club, where I might see him. And since Jase led such a blessed life that he didn’t ever have to step foot in a grocery store, pharmacy, or McDonald’s, we hadn’t crossed paths.

Except for once on the street while watching the Fourth of July parade, and that was two years ago.

He signed the paper and handed it over to Mrs. Bauer, and then I saw him look our way again.

“Jared?” he said, peering around me, surprised.

My son turned his head to look at Madoc’s father, and I glanced between them. Jared didn’t remember him, did he? We were careful.

Unless Jared had run into him at Madoc’s house, since they were friends.

Jase regarded him, though, as if he was seeing him for the first time.

“Yeah?” Jared asked, sounding annoyed.

But Jase simply turned away. “You’re both getting suspended together.” He handed Mrs. Bauer the pen, talking to Madoc. “How come I’ve never met your friend before?”

“Probably because he’s at our house more than you are,” his son shot back.

I smiled, taking too much pleasure in that comeback. Madoc might not be giving Jase the hell Jared gave me, but it was something, and I liked knowing someone in his life was holding him accountable.

A cell phone rang, and Jase pulled his out of his breast pocket, checking the screen. Tapping a button, he slipped it back into his pocket. “May I please have my stepdaughter, Fallon Pierce, as well?” he asked Mrs. Bauer. “Might as well pick her up while I’m here and save Addie the trip.”

The receptionist gave him a look, her mouth twisting in annoyance. “Of course,” she finally grumbled.

Heat covered my skin, and I wasn’t sure if it was Jase or the mention of a stepdaughter. I knew he’d remarried quickly after his divorce from Madoc’s mother years ago.

Very quickly, in fact.

Yeah, men like him didn’t know how to be without wives to handle their houses and kids and schedule the fucking gardeners and caterers. All so they can have everything and sacrifice nothing.

But it wasn’t me. He had his dirty fun with the trailer park girl. He couldn’t marry her.

I ground my teeth together and swung my purse over my shoulder.

“I’m going to go wait in the car,” I heard Madoc say as he grabbed his father’s keys off the counter.

“Yeah, me, too.” Jared plucked my set out of my purse.

But I shot out my hand, snatching them back. “Absolutely not,” I snapped. “You don’t move a muscle without my say-so. You got that? And you will apologize to Tate as soon as she gets home from school.”

“I’m not doing shit,” he bit back and turned around. “I’ll be in the parking lot.”

“Jared!”

But all I could do was watch as both boys walked out of the office, leaving Jase and me alone.

“Genetics is amazing, isn’t it?” Jase commented at my side. “Jared hasn’t seen his father since he was a baby, and yet there’s so much of the man in him.”

I darted my eyes to Jase, my nostrils probably flaring. “You don’t know Jared or anything he’s been through, so don’t act like you do.”

Spinning around, I walked out of the office, trying to get far away from him.

But he was on my heels instantly. “Well, I’m wondering if you even know him.”

I clutched my purse strap, fisting my hand around it to keep it from shaking.

“And what do you mean ‘what he’s been through’?” he asked. “He hasn’t seen his father, has he?”

I charged down the hallway, his familiar scent of sandalwood, angelica, and something else I couldn’t place washing over me like an ice-cold martini. I licked my dry lips.

“Kat?” he pressed when I didn’t answer. “Please tell me you weren’t stupid enough to let that man near him.”

I refused to answer. Jase was out of my life, and I wasn’t sure why he felt the need to act concerned. He might not be a criminal like Thomas, but they were both neglectful fathers. He had no right to judge me.

A young woman, about Jared and Madoc's age, came down the stairs, catching us right before we walked out the door.

"Hey, what's up?" she asked, clutching her backpack straps at her shoulders. Her eyes moved from Jase to me, and then back to Jase.

"I needed to pick up Madoc, so I thought I'd grab you, too," he answered.

*Ah, the stepdaughter.*

Her green eyes turned annoyed behind her glasses. "Awesome," she bit out. "Moron screws up, and I have to go home, too."

Jase sighed and pushed open the door for her. "Just get in the car."

She strolled outside and he looked to me, gesturing with his arm. I walked through the door and stopped at the top of the steps, watching the kids in the parking lot. Jared's face was buried in his phone, while Madoc made faces like a five-year-old at his stepsister.

"They seem to get along well," I mused, not caring I sounded sarcastic. "I heard you remarried a couple of years ago. Congratulations."

He let out a long breath, descending the stairs with me. "Life moves on, I guess. How about you? Are you seeing anyone?"

I stared at him, with his face like stone and his voice almost bored like he was asking me if I'd tried the new restaurant on High Street yet.

He almost looked calm.

But then I noticed that he wasn't breathing again.

I tilted the corner of my mouth up, letting out a small smile. "Like you said, life moves on."

• • •

I held my pen in my hand, sitting curled up in the dark living room in the chair. Music played from the stereo, and I covered my legs with a blanket, staring at the words on the paper, the beautiful oblivion of the rum heating my veins and clouding my brain.

He was never mine. I knew that much all those years ago, so why the hell did I let him in? My chest ached with a sob I wouldn't let out, my eyes burning with tears. I swallowed the lump in my throat and picked up my drink, forcing it all down my throat.

I never learned how to be someone. Who was I without him?

His life had moved forward in our time apart. His father had passed away last year, and Jase now ran one of the most successful law firms in the country. Many mornings I woke up faced with him in my newspaper and, as always, he won everything he went after. Nothing had ever distracted him, least of all losing me.

I, on the other hand, remained still. I'd rarely dated, and I hadn't moved forward in a long time. My heart was still broken.

And that was proven after seeing him this afternoon and completely falling apart as soon I'd gotten home. Jared charged for his room, slamming the door, and I made for the freezer, pulling out what was always in there, and chasing the promise of escape. I could forget him every night.

Or remember him. If I drank enough.

I clutched the diary in my hand, holding it against my knees, and dug my pen into the paper.

"I wish I'd never met him."

"Who?" a voice asked. "My father?"

I popped my head up and saw Jared leaning against the door frame between the living room and the foyer, staring at me with his hands in his pockets.

“Yeah, your life would’ve been better if you’d never met him and I’d never been born, wouldn’t it?”

I glanced back down at the words I’d written. Had I said them out loud?

Looking back up, I shook my head. “That’s not what I was talking about.” I closed the diary, leaving the pen inside when I set it down on the end table.

He continued to watch me, and I heard rain begin to fall against the window as the clock chimed on the mantel. What time was it?

Taking a quick look at the clock, I saw it was after eight. I hadn’t made dinner, and he hadn’t eaten anything, having been up in his room since one this afternoon.

I combed my hand through my hair, my stomach churning at how disgusting and pathetic I was.

My voice was barely audible. “I’m sorry, baby.”

“Don’t call me that.”

He strolled over to my side and gazed out the window, through the shimmer of rain. The shadows of the leaves outside fluttered across his face, and he seemed much older than his fifteen years.

Jared hadn’t had a hard life the way his father or I did. He never wanted for much, and there was always food in the refrigerator and decent clothes on his back. And there were times when I was a good mom. He wasn’t always alone.

Unfortunately, though, Jared learned at a very young age that while he could’ve had it worse, he also could’ve had it a lot better. Tate’s dad was a single father, after all. How come he could be there for his kid, and I couldn’t?

His father abandoned him and abused him, and his mother was so busy making up for her lost youth that she neglected him.

His eyes darkened as he stared out the window and narrowed his brow. All I could feel was the distance between us. I couldn't remember the last time he let me hug him.

"You should go over there," I said quietly.

"Where?"

"Tate's."

That was what he was seeing when he stared out the window. Her house sat right next to ours, and she was the only thing that ever made him happy.

"Yeah, you'd like that, wouldn't you?" he ground out. "Get me out of your hair?"

"What?" I leaned up, putting my feet on the ground and staring at him. "Jared, no—"

"Tate can screw off and go to hell," he growled, cutting me off. "I hate her."

I shot out of my chair, but I was too fast. My mind fogged over, and my balance teetered suddenly. I grabbed onto the back of the chair for support.

"Jared, what's the matter? What happened?" I pressed. "You need your friends."

But he just glared ahead. "Not her. She's just like everyone else. Doesn't give a shit about anyone but herself, stupid fucking cow."

And then he spun around and headed out of the room.

"Jared!" I yelled, chasing after him, but my knees wobbled, and I felt like I was falling. "If this is your friend Madoc's influence," I choked out, trying to swallow the acid creeping up my throat, "I don't want you hanging around him anymore!"

"Yeah, good luck with that," he laughed and opened the front door. "Why don't you fucking wake up for a change, huh? He's not the bad influence. I am."



He stepped onto the porch, and I grabbed his arm, pulling him back around.

“Don’t touch me!” he bellowed, his eyes dark and his breathing heavy. He yanked his arm away, and I stood there, my blanket falling off my arm and my work clothes wrinkled.

Fear wracked through me, and I was frozen. I couldn’t speak.

His eyebrows dug in, and he looked like he was going to hit something. Or someone. For a moment, I almost let out a cry. It was like looking at Thomas all over again.

My stomach shook, and I just wanted to fold. I was afraid of him. I was afraid of my kid.

And it was my fault.

The times he’d been pushed off to his grandparents or friends and my never being there, the neglect, the way I never put him first . . . I’d never been his mother, because I never made the choice to. I grew up with him, not for him.

I could barely speak, my throat swelled with so much with pain. “I wish . . . ,” I whispered, letting my eyes fall. “I wish I was a better mom, Jared.”

He was silent for a moment and then spoke up, his voice low and calm. “And I wish you’d just go away.”

I shut my eyes, feeling the tears spill over as I heard his steps travel down the porch and disappear. When I opened my eyes, he was gone, and I couldn’t see him through the rain and darkness.

I let the blanket fall completely, and I turned around, my steps faltering as I walked back into the house.

*What the hell have I done?* Why had I given Jase so much power over my happiness? What if Jared ran off and left me, because it was nothing less than what I deserved?

A ringing pierced the silence, and I jerked my head to the left and right, trying to follow the sound.

My phone.

Jared.

I ran to my purse where it lay on the table by the stairs and pulled out my phone. But before I pressed Send, I caught sight of the number on the screen and my heart skipped a beat.

*What?*

He hadn't called since . . .

He never called. Not since a few weeks after we ended things, but I never answered. Not the first time he called or the tenth time. After a while, he got the message. He let me go.

A spark of want flared in my veins. So long . . .

Slowly pressing Send, I rested my back against the wall and slid down, bringing the phone to my ears as I bent my knees and fell to the floor.

There was silence, but probably because I was supposed to say something, and I hadn't yet.

I wouldn't.

I heard a breath on the other end, and chills ran over my skin.

"I still think about you," he said, his voice quiet and pained. "Every day. So many times every day." And then he let out a breath. "It was harder than I let on, seeing you today, and I know I shouldn't be calling, but I needed to hear your voice again. I've never stopped missing you."

Tears filled my eyes, and everything in front of me blurred. "It didn't stop you from marrying again."

He was silent for a moment, and all I could feel was despair. I didn't know if it was him, me, or both of us, but the tale had become too twisted to set right anymore. We knew that much.

"I'd hurt you so much," he admitted. "I used you and tore you apart and made you unhappy, and . . . I thought if I stayed

away you'd be better off. I thought if I married someone else, I'd forget you and what I did to you and Maddie and my son, and my fucking heart wouldn't hurt so much. I should've come for you, but why would you want me anymore? You had to hate me, right? I could barely stand the sight of myself."

I clenched my lips tightly to keep from crying out loud.

"That's my greatest regret," he went on, his voice cracking with sadness. "I regret cheating on my wife. I regret never being there for Madoc when I should be, but you . . ." He drifted off. "I wish I could go back to that day at the garage and see you again with your messy ponytail and your warm, beautiful eyes, with that grease stain on your neck that I kept wanting to touch . . . and I wish I would've left when you told me to leave."

I hugged myself, pressing the phone to my ear and letting the tears fall as I listened.

"I wish I could've left you like that and never taken your life from you and never hurt you. Just left, because I'd be happy knowing you were going to be better off for it. That the fire in your eyes would never have died."

My chin trembled, and my chest shook. A sob escaped, and I brought my hand to my mouth, covering it to muffle the noise.

"I wish I could do that," he continued. "But that's the fucking thing, you know? If I went back to that day, saw you in that thin white T-shirt, and your breathing so nervous, because you were afraid of me but still had the courage to fight back . . . No matter how much I'd want to, I'd do nothing differently." His voice grew stronger. "Nothing. I wouldn't be able to stop myself. I'd dive right back in, even knowing how badly everything would end, because you're the only life I've ever had, and I couldn't not have you." His voice shook, thick with tears he wasn't letting out. "I'd crash and burn a thousand times just to have you."

I squeezed my eyes shut and broke down, hanging up the phone and finally letting it all go.

I still loved him, and it was so difficult to figure out why, if we could be so good together, why were we so terrible together, too? How could something be so right and so toxic at the same time?

But as I sat in my dark house, the buzz of the alcohol making my limbs heavy, I realized that maybe I was my own worst enemy. And maybe Jase was his. We weren't toxic together, because even apart we were miserable.

And we weren't a mistake. Maybe it was everything keeping us apart that was a mistake.

Jase Caruthers couldn't fix me, and I couldn't fix him. Plain and simple.

We just weren't right for each other yet.

Maybe in another life . . .

. . .

“Hey, can I talk to you for a sec?”

“Can it wait until we get to the track?” Jared asks, sounding stressed. And then he raises his eyes from James's shoes, making sure they're double knotted. “Are you riding with me?”

“No, she's with me.” Madoc grins. “I'm making her drive.”

He and Kade pick up the cooler and plop it down on the porch, heading back in to gather the GoPros and camera bag.

“Dylan!” Jared bellows to her somewhere in the house. “You need to leave! Jax wants you to do more practice runs before you're up!”

“Ugh,” she groans, walking in from the dining room. “I've been doing practice runs since I was twelve. I think I got it.”

Madoc tosses something to Kade, nearly hitting me in the face, and Tate, Fallon, and Juliet all rush back down the stairs,

one of them kissing me on the forehead as they pass.

I close my eyes and ball my fists. “Can you just stop for a minute?” I bark. “I have something I need to show you.”

“Well, then, hurry,” Jared snaps, finishing James’s shoe.

“I found this book,” I tell him. “Or it was sent to me, I mean. I’m pretty sure it’s about Mom and Dad. It’s like their love story or something.”

“What?” Tate asks, scrunching up her face in confusion as she puts on her sunglasses and Fallon sprays sunscreen on Madoc’s and Kade’s necks as they walk by.

“Look.” I take out the hardcover and hand it to Jared, opening to the bookmarked page so that I can point to the names that are eerily close to my parents’. “Kat and Jase.”

Tate comes over to look at it, but Jared couldn’t look less interested. He hands the book back and pats his jeans, probably for his keys and wallet.

“And they have sons, Jared and Madoc,” I point out. “They live in a small town in Illinois, she had a baby with some asshole, he’s married, their sons are friends, and Jared is in love with the girl next door who he picks on every day at school.” I glance at Tate and then back to Jared. “Did you really do that?”

Jared just laughs to himself, pulling his phone off the charger in the nearby living room and sliding it into his back pocket. “Who would write a book about our parents? It doesn’t mean anything.”

Everyone gathers the rest of their things, pulls on shoes, and heads for the front door.

“Let’s go!” Jared yells.

I groan under my breath and grind my teeth. *Damn it!*

I have to spin around and head to the porch, calling after him as everyone drifts across the lawn. “Did you tell Mom that

women were high-maintenance bitches that needed to be walked more than once a day?”

Everyone suddenly stops and Jared freezes. I hear a few gasps, and I think there’s a snort from Kade.

I see the muscles in Jared’s back tighten through his T-shirt, everyone is absolutely silent, and I’m tempted to smile.

*Yeaaaaaah. I have your attention now, don’t I?*

I’d read a few more chapters while I was at Jax’s, and things between Jared and our mom only got worse over the next year. He said some really interesting things as the arguments escalated, too.

Slowly, everyone turns around to face me, and Jared stares at me, looking stunned, while Tate gives him a horrified look.

“Jared, you didn’t,” she says.

But he can do nothing but rush to his own defense. “I was like sixteen!” he bursts out, breathing heavily. “Jesus Christ, I was probably drunk!”

He charges over and takes the book away from me, opening it to a random page and scanning.

I hold out my hand. “Give it back.”

“Like hell!” he barks.

“I can tell Tate what you called her behind her back when you were fifteen,” I say loudly. “Now give it back.”

He shoots his worried eyes over to Tate, who simply cocks her head to the side and puts her hands on her hips, looking a little pissed. He then glances at Dylan, who looks half-amused and half-embarrassed. Knowing the man Jared is now, it’s hard to believe he was ever cruel—or ended up winning Tate when he treated her like crap back then—but Dylan rolls with things better than anyone I know. It is kind of entertaining to realize your parents aren’t perfect. And hey, even better to have that pointed out in front of everyone.

He scowls and hands the book back. “Quinn,” he starts, trying to explain. “I was a huge asshole in high school, okay?”

“Yeah, no duh.”

And then Jared twists his head to the side and glares at Juliet. “Did you do this?”

She snorts, and I realize he’s thinking the same thing I was.

“Oh, yeah,” she says, playing with him. “I totally wrote it. You know you had it coming, right? All the years you guys spent disrespecting women”—she flashes a look at Madoc—“never dreaming that someday you’d have a daughter, a sister, and a niece, whom you adore. It was totally me. Payback is slow but sure. Mwahahahaha!”

Tate and Fallon laugh at her side, and Jared focuses back on me. “Quinn . . .”

But I just roll my eyes and shake my head, walking around him. “Forget it. It’s fine.”

Nothing has changed in how much I love my brothers, and I know he went through a lot growing up, but damn . . . what a little asshole!

## Chapter 9

The Shelburne Falls Racetrack takes up several acres in the middle of the countryside, run by Jax and heavily invested in by Jared, Madoc, and Tate. They all raced here years ago, and as the Trents and Carutherses slowly took over management and expansion, it had grown far beyond its original single dirt course circling a dinky little pond.

Back in the day, it was called the Loop, and all you needed was a car. Races were informal, and usually consisted of unsupervised teens hanging out to have a little fun.

Now, instead of the original one loop, there's two. The new one isn't completely square like the original. It features twists and turns, as well as being much longer than the original. The tracks are paved, there are contracts and rules, and there are managers in place to keep everything running smoothly. While some balk at how much the Loop has changed, Jax knows what he's doing. To keep people interested, you have to keep introducing something new. And since attendance has grown to twenty times what it was when it first started, procedures had to be put in place to keep everyone safe.

But still, it's completely free to attend just like it's always been. The track makes its money from sponsors, concessions, and merchandise.

Following the rest of my family, I slip my bag strap over my head, tossing it in the backseat of Fallon's car. I'll most likely get a ride from her on the way home. She and Madoc live so close to me, after all.

As I walk over the grassy area, I notice a couple of guys I went to school with turn and nod a "hi."

I tip my chin back up and resist the urge to chew on my lip. Juliet's leather skinny pants fit like a glove, and the off-the-shoulder white T-shirt I'd borrowed flows down past my ass but left my bare shoulder exposed. She'd slapped some red



lipstick on me and messed up my hair. Thankfully, Jared and Madoc had seemed too rushed to notice yet.

“I want to race the Boss!” I can hear Dylan as I head over to where she stands on the track.

Jared climbs out of the car she’s standing next to and hands her the keys, probably having just pulled it into position for her.

“Enough,” he bites out. “We’re not changing the plan this late in the game.”

“I’ve been asking you for months. I’m better in that car!” she argues.

Jared closes his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose and looking exasperated. “Okay, let’s try something new.” He opens his eyes back up and looks straight at me, not Dylan. “Quinn,” he says. “Dylan can’t drive the Boss, because she wants to race the Big Loop. The Big Loop has tight twists and turns, and she needs a lighter-weight vehicle if she wants to have any chance of handling that track.” His tone is sarcastic, and I can feel Dylan tense next to me as I fight not to laugh.

“Not only will she lose if she races with the Boss,” he goes on, “but she’ll also probably take out every other car, trying to make those turns. Now, can you please explain that to my daughter in a way that she understands, because every time I try it’s like I’m talking to a wall?”

And then he shoots Dylan a pointed look before turning around and walking away.

Dylan just stands there silently until I glance at her out of the corner of my eye. “So you got all that, right?”

“Shut up.”

I snort, and she folds her arms over her chest, pouting.

“You’re just nervous, and you want a familiar car,” I soothe, turning toward her. “You’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, better listen to Daddy like a good little girl,” Kade teases. He and his brother walk around us to stand in front of her.

“Leave her alone, Kade,” Hunter says.

But Kade just shoots him a cocky grin and turns his eyes back on Dylan, lowering his voice. “She can handle me.”

Hunter shakes his head, while Dylan stares at Kade, looking defiant. He’s always pushed her and teased her, and she always rises to meet the challenges he throws down. Like he sets the pace and she needs to try to keep up.

I don’t like the way he eggs her on and constantly makes her feel like she needs to prove herself.

I doubt his twin likes it, either. They often fight, and Dylan’s usually not far from the root of the problem.

Kade twists around with a gloating little smile on his face and walks to the bleachers where his friends are sitting. A girl hops down from the stands and slinks her arms around his neck, and he holds her hips, kissing her long and slow and putting on a nice show for everyone.

I wince, turning my eyes away. I’ve absorbed enough family bedroom knowledge for one day, thank you.

But then I see Dylan staring in his direction, her eyes pained.

Hunter watches her and then shakes his head, turning around to leave.

“Hunter?” she calls, stopping him.

He spins back around, looking agitated. “Yeah, what?”

She fidgets with her hands and stares at him, wincing a little. “I’m nervous.”

He breathes out a quiet laugh, like he understands completely.

Walking up to her, he pulls his iPod out of his jeans' pocket and yanks out the cord to his headphones that hang around his neck, and hands her the iPod.

“War playlist,” he instructs. “Track five.”

She lets out a relieved breath and smiles. “Thanks.”

He nods, letting his gaze linger on her for a moment. Reaching out, he tips her chin up. “You're Dylan Trent. They're scared of you. Don't forget that.”

She gives him a shaky smile and inhales a deep breath, squaring her shoulders again. “Got it.”

He turns and heads to the bleachers, sitting next to Hawke, on the opposite side from Kade and his friends. Hunter is on the football team with Hawke and his brother, but he always sits apart, separate from everyone else.

“So how's that book going?” Dylan asks.

I glance over at her, remembering she left off after the kitchen floor scene.

She'd missed a lot, and my mind turns back to everything I've read tonight.

I'm confused about my mother and father's relationship. I keep trying to remember how they are now, solid and happy. It's hard to wrap my head around how much of a life everyone—my parents, Jared, Madoc, Jax—had before I was born.

My mom and dad eventually got their shit together. I've yet to finish the book, so I'm not sure how. But I hate their stupid choices and having to readjust everything I thought I knew about them. Also, I still have no clue who sent the book to me—or why it's important to them that I know the backstory to my parents' marriage. Is someone trying to stir shit up?

I also hate how I felt everything Kat was feeling. The uncertainty, the fear, the desire to stay with what's familiar even if you're miserable . . . the powerlessness.

I can relate.

“She’s so weak,” I finally admit, noticing the hint of self-hate in my voice. “She scheduled her entire life around him. Barely existed without him or had any interests or hobbies outside of him. He held her entire happiness in his hands.”

Dylan leans back on her Silvia, the car her dad is making her race tonight, and stares ahead.

“It’s not so unusual, is it?” she responds in a thoughtful tone. “How much we invest in wanting one person’s love? In wanting them near and for them to think of us?”

I notice she’s looking over at Kade’s group, and it occurs to me that maybe I’m not the only one relating.

“No, it’s not unusual,” I agree. “I think too many people give others too much power over them. But if they’re not missing you or thinking about you or wanting to be near you, then it’s time to realize you’re worth someone who does.”

We stand there, the chaos of the crowds and music around us a distant hum as the conversation hangs in the air.

Lucas clearly forgot we all existed back here, and Kade uses Dylan like a pet puppy, enticing her to learn tricks for his amusement.

Dylan shivers and blows out a breath. “Well, that was deep,” she jokes and turns to me. “All right, you’re with me, right?”

I laugh. “No. I have zero interest.”

I don’t like the way she drives when she’s not racing, so she can do this without me riding shotgun.

“No argument,” she protests. “No one will tell your dad. I promise.”

I dart my eyes to the two drones hovering overhead.

Dylan follows my gaze. “Oh, yeah,” she grumbles. “I forgot about those.”

Jax thought drones would be a great feature to use for overhead shots and video, as well as an easier way to capture

what went on out on the off-roading tracks. While I could avoid the GoPros on the cars, the drones would get shots of who's inside the cars, and my dad would eventually get wind of it.

“Clear the track!” Zack Hager, one of the track managers, booms over the speakers.

A flood of people disperses, clearing the area and heading to their preferred vantage point: the bleachers, their cars, or behind the fence. Music blasts into the air, and the huge digital clock counts down from thirty, letting the racers know they should be in their cars when it hits zero.

“Well, here I go.” Dylan exhales a heavy breath and smiles excitedly.

I brush her chin with my fist, fake punching her. “Here’s looking at you, kid.”

She bumps my hip with hers. “Stay gold, Ponyboy.”

I always laugh at our customary farewell, quoting *Casablanca* and *The Outsiders*, respectively.

She climbs into her race car, a tricked-out Nissan Silvia that was part of her father’s collection, as I leave the track and position myself behind the chain-link fence.

Normally Jared prefers American muscle, but he was forced to broaden his horizons when he became such a big deal.

Madoc stands at my side with Fallon and their daughter, A.J., on his other side.

There are three cars lined up on the track, and I don’t recognize the other two drivers, but they look young, so it should give Dylan a decent chance. They likely won’t have much more experience than she does.

Engines fire up, and I feel the high-pitched whir vibrating underneath my feet.

“Any of this getting you excited?”

I look at Madoc, the ever-hopeful light shining in his eyes. “Like turned on, you mean?”

“No!” he bursts out, looking disgusted. “I mean like, do you finally want a car, so you can stop mooching off family for rides? Look at them.” He waves his hand toward the track. “They’re so hot. Don’t you want that?”

“Pay him no mind,” Fallon says, peeking around him. “He’s about to orgasm.”

I laugh, holding the waist-high fence with both hands. Exhaust pours out of the cars, the red stoplight shines bright in the warm evening dusk, and my stomach starts to flip a little. Dylan must be so nervous.

“Just go ride with Dylan,” Madoc suggests. “Get a feel for the car.”

“There’s drones everywhere. You know Dad will find out.”

“Dad dealt with me racing,” he points out. “He can handle you doing a ride-along.”

“She’s not interested, Madoc,” Fallon scolds. “Leave her alone.”

*Thank you.*

But then Madoc spits out, “She doesn’t know what she is.” And my smile falls at his harsh tone. “Her entire life has been played out from the palm of his hand since the day she was born. She can’t make a decision without running to Daddy for his input.”

My eyes flare.

“Madoc!” Fallon whisper-yells.

I jerk my head to face him, glaring. “What did you just say?”

He shrugs, a challenge in his smiling eyes. “I said you’re a wimp.”

*That’s it!*

I storm back onto the track and head straight for Dylan's car. I open the passenger side door and turn to look at Madoc, shooting him my middle finger, because he's an invasive, interfering butt-nugget who needs to learn how to shut up.

Everyone in the vicinity starts laughing, Madoc included, and I dive into the car, anger raging beneath my skin.

Dylan stares at me with her eyebrows raised in a question.

I breathe hard and pull the seat belt down over my head, the shoulder straps descending in a V in front of me as I fasten it.

"I have places I want to travel and recipes I haven't tried. Stay on the road and don't kill me in this thing," I warn her.

But she just frowns at me. "Roads? Where we're going we don't need roads."

*Oh, whatever.* I roll my eyes at her *Back to the Future* reference.

She chuckles and plugs in the iPod. "War playlist," she says to herself, navigating the touch screen on her radio. "Track five."

The screen reads "'Stronger' by Through the Fire," but as soon as the song starts, Dylan's door opens.

Jared leans in, looking at his daughter and holding out a necklace of some sort. It's some kind of charm or something on a ribbon.

She smiles and reaches out slowly, as if shocked. "Thanks," she says, her voice small.

He nods and gives her a half-smile, and then reaches over, pulling on her and my harnesses, making sure we're locked in. Kissing her forehead quickly, he closes the door.

"What is that?" I ask, watching her hang the charm on her rearview mirror.

"It's my mom's thumbprint," she answers. "It was a craft she made when she was little. My dad had it with him in every

race for good luck.”

The charm looks like an oval piece of clay no bigger than a quarter, and in the middle is a small fingerprint pressed into the piece, like a fossil. It hangs on a tattered, light green ribbon that looks ages old.

The announcer’s voice shouts over the speakers outside, and I tense, hearing the crowd begin to go wild.

It’s time.

Dylan squeezes the steering wheel, twisting the leather in her tight fist as she focuses out on the road, and the music starts to get going.

Outside, the engines rev over and over again, and Dylan begins rocking to the song Hunter gave her, her eyes narrowing and getting zoned in as she looks at the road like it’s her bitch.

I gulp, feeling her engine rev underneath me, and when I glance at the cars on our left and right, the windows are tinted so dark I can’t see a thing. *Shit*. A steel band wraps around my stomach, and my heart’s in my throat.

*Fuckin’ Madoc.*

The red light changes to yellow, the engines roar, and screams hit my ears, and then . . .

Dylan shoots off, and I slam back in my seat.

“Oh, my God.” I damn near choke on my breath.

We race down the track, Dylan punching into third and then fifth, skipping second and fourth altogether, and I’m breathing hard, scanning the track for the other drivers.

The car to our left is only a hair behind, and the car to the right is head-to-head. Dylan jerks the steering wheel to the left, rounding the first turn, and then charges ahead, winding to the left and then the right for a few minor curves as she slams into fifth. The car on the right falls behind, but the white Honda on the left pulls up head-to-head with us.



The lights on the track dart past us like stars at warp speed, and I grab hold of the safety bar with one hand and my seat belt strap with the other.

A tight right lies ahead, and I glance at Dylan, seeing the muscles in her arm flexed and her jaw locked shut.

*Is she going to slow down? We'll flip at this speed!*

“Dylan.”

The Honda pushes harder, not backing off, and it looks like it's trying to take the corner with us.

“Dylan,” I warn again. She needs to slow down.

But instead, she punches into sixth, growling, “Screw this.” And she slams on the gas, going faster as the music screams at us and fills the whole fucking car.

“Hell, yes!” she bellows. “Thank you, Hunter! Who!”

“Oh, my God!” I scream and cover my face with my hands, because I can't look.

My body vaults to the left as she turns right, the torque dragging us around the turn, and I scream as I keep my eyes squeezed shut under my hands.

I feel the car tip, and my head hangs to the side as an army of butterflies swarm in my stomach.

“Holy shit!” I burst out.

The car straightens, and I feel the tires on my side find the ground again as I jerk my head to look behind me. The other two cars are behind us now, the blue one way back.

Adrenaline floods my body, and I can feel every single hair on my arms stand on end.

I laugh, the rush of emotion too much to contain. “Go, go, go!” I urge her.

She smiles at me, and I turn the song on full blast, as high as it will go.

She takes the curves quick and smooth, rounds the next left and right and swings around the last quarter of the track.

The white Honda creeps up on her again, and all of a sudden something hits her driver's side window. We jump and Dylan swerves as we jerk our eyes to the window. She struggles with the steering wheel, trying to gain control of the car again.

"What the hell?" she growls.

A white glob of what appears to be wet paper sticks to her window, slowly falling off in little chunks.

"Asshole," she yells and presses the button, rolling down her window.

"Dylan, don't."

But she does it anyway.

The guy in the car next to us, young, with black hair and a cocky grin, snarls at her. "Weston sends its regards, Pirate bitch!"

I groan. *Really?*

Dylan turns her eyes back on the road and shifts into sixth again, speeding up.

"Dylan! Slow down!" I yell as she comes up to the last turn.

"No!" she growls, mumbling to herself. "Piece of shit, asshole. This is a Falls track. He doesn't get to push us around."

Weston is one of Shelburne Falls High's rivals, and they only come over here to start shit. Them and Saint Matthew's, a private school near Chicago. Sometimes the two schools even partner up to give our Pirate football team hell and anyone who goes to Shelburne High, for that matter.

"Yeah, go ahead and try to be your daddy, baby," the guy eggs her on. "You fall short!"

“Haven’t you heard?” she shouts out the window at him.  
“I’m a mama’s girl!”

And she speeds up even more.

“Dylan!” I yell, clutching the safety bar.

But she hits the corner, tries to turn, but the Honda’s on the inside, not backing off. His turn widens, and she barrels into the brush, forced off the track. I spot his car, flying into the grass as well, and we bounce in our seats as we hit the rough terrain. The car skids to a halt, both of us lurching forward, against the harnesses as the car stalls.

My shoulder burns from where the strap rubbed, and I breathe hard.

“Oh, my God. Are you okay?”

I look over at Dylan, but she’s already tearing out of her seat belt and charging out of the car.

I fist my fingers several times, taking inventory to make sure I’m okay before I unfasten my belt, too.

Following her out of the car, I see everyone, a crowd of people, running down the track toward us.

To our right, the Weston asshole is crawling out of his heap, rubbing his head.

Jared rushes up and takes Dylan’s face in his hands, scanning her head and body. “Are you okay?”

She’s breathing hard, still shaken, but she nods.

Jared steps up to me. “You okay?”

“Yeah.”

Madoc, Jax, Tate, Fallon, and Juliet all follow, fawning all over us, checking our limbs for any bruises or scratches, a crowd of people surrounding us so tightly I can barely breathe.

Jared approaches the Weston kid, getting in his face. “If I weren’t the adult, you’d be on the ground right now,” he

threatens. “Get the hell off this track and don’t come back. You’re banned.”

The kid turns his face away, scowling as Jared leers over him.

“Dylan, are you okay?” Hunter steps up, pushing through the crowd.

But then I hear Kade’s smooth voice off to the side. “Well,” he says, grinning as he approaches the Weston guy. “Lucky for me, I’m not the adult.”

And he throws a punch in the guy’s face, sending the kid reeling back and crashing into Dylan. Both of them tumble to the ground, Dylan crying out as she lands on the gravel lining the track.

“Ow, shit,” she cries.

“Kade!” Hunter yells at his brother and scrambles through the tight crowd to get down to her and pull the guy off her. Helping her up, Hunter turns her arm over, checking out the scrapes.

But Kade didn’t even notice. “When you come to the Falls,” he warns the guy, bending over to grip his collar, “bring backup, you fucking idiot.”

“Enough!” Madoc grabs his son off the guy.

Kade drops the kid, and he and his friends sneer down at him.

“Everyone off the track!” Jax hollers, trying to push everyone back. “Now! We need room!”

Jared stares down at the Weston kid, planted on his ass. “Get your car, and get out of here, or I’ll have it towed.”

Everyone starts to disperse, and I check out Dylan’s arm, making sure she’s okay. The scratches are red and angry, but she’s not bleeding.

As soon as nearly everyone is gone, Hunter lashes out at Kade. “What the hell is the matter with you?”

His brother just sneers. “Oh, why don’t you grow a set, huh?”

Kade’s friends snicker and laugh, but then Kade’s eyes lock on Hunter’s hands on Dylan’s arms, and Kade pushes them off her. “Let her go. She’s fine.”

“Stop it,” I finally chime in.

“Hunter, I’m fine,” Dylan assures. “It’s cool.”

“See.” Kade smiles at his brother. “She can handle it.”

Hunter shakes his head, anger written all over his face.

“And the night’s just getting started,” Kade points out, looking around to his friends. “Road trip to Weston, anyone?”

The guys smile, mischief gleaming from their eyes, and I rub my hand down my face.

Hawke hooks an arm around Kade’s neck, both of them staring at Dylan. “Under a Black Flag We Sail,” he reminds her, reciting the Pirate motto.

“Hell yeah,” one of the guys adds.

Dylan stares at Kade, his challenge clear. Weston deserved a retaliation, and was she game?

Hunter looks to her, narrowing his eyes. “Dylan, don’t.”

She glances at him before looking back toward Kade, and I see it in her eyes. The conflict. She knows what’s right, but she wants what’s wrong.

“I can take care of myself, Hunter.” And then she steps toward Kade, Hawke, and their friends.

## Chapter 10

“Hey, you all going home?”

Fallon pops her head up from the trunk and nods. “Yeah, we’ll do some s’mores and let the kids catch fireflies. Try to shake off what happened tonight. Might need some wine, too.” She laughs. “You want to come with? Madoc can drop you home later.”

“Sure.”

I’d already texted my parents, letting them know I was with Madoc and the rest of the gang and that I might crash at his house tonight.

I help Fallon load up a cooler, lighter now that she’d drained the melted ice. Opening the back door, I grab my bag and take Lucas’s hat off the strap, turning it around in my hands before putting it on.

The truth is, I can blame my dad for holding me back as much as I want, but there are other things that keep me in my stalemate. That keep me nervous to leave for college in the fall, afraid I’ll miss something back here. That keep me weak and invested in things that probably don’t deserve my attention.

I clear my throat. “So how’s Lucas doing?” I ask, trying to sound casual. “Have you talked to him much?”

“Only as far as work goes,” she replies, pushing up her black-framed glasses. “When our firms cross paths and such. He just . . .” She pauses, thinking, “established his own life out there, I guess. Madoc talks to him, though. He refuses to let Lucas get away.”

I’m sure. Madoc likes to see his family grow, not shrink.

“I wonder what keeps him out there,” I cage, knowing exactly what I was hinting at. “I guess he must like it. You don’t miss him?”

“Of course, I do,” she rushed to reply. “But . . .”

“But what?”

She finishes securing A.J.’s seat belt, closes the car door, and shrugs. “I know he’ll come home,” she states. “Everyone comes home. He left for a reason, and we might not completely understand it, but he obviously wants distance, and I’m respecting that. He knows we’re here when he’s ready.”

“Well, he shouldn’t assume everyone will just wait for him.”

But Fallon frowns, studying me. “Who’s waiting?”

I slow my hands, seeing the wheels in her head turning as she probably wonders what the hell I’m talking about. *Yeah. Who’s waiting, Quinn?* No one else is putting their lives on hold for Lucas Morrow.

I finish pushing the seat cushions into place in the trunk and quickly grab the picnic blanket off the ground. “I’ll take this to Tate.”

And I walk away, as fast as I can from her stare.

Tate is standing near her car, having just finished placing her sleeping son into his seat. I hand her the blanket that I recognized was hers.

“Thanks.” She tosses it in the backseat.

“You all going to Madoc and Fallon’s or going home?”

“Home,” she replies. “James has a doubleheader tomorrow, and I promised your brother ‘cuddle time’ tonight if he’s going to be forced to sit through two baseball games tomorrow.”

She did the air quotes around “cuddle time,” and I laughed to myself, knowing what that meant.

“Tell Jared, racing is a sport, too,” I correct. He found sports like baseball, basketball, and football boring, and while he wouldn’t really be considered an athlete, there’s skill and sweat in racing. He was into sports, just not ones that required running. Or standing.

Or fighting with other guys over a ball.

But he made every effort to show up for his kids. I think I respected him more for that. He put in the time, watching events that were tedious to him, because he really loved his children and wanted to do everything to support them.

“It’s not hard for him to do things he doesn’t like for his kids’ happiness, is it?” I ask. “Probably because he had such a rough time with our mom. He knew what kind of parent he wanted to be. And what kind he didn’t want to be.”

She stops and thinks about it for a moment. “I’m sure that had something to do with it.”

It’s strange to me that he doesn’t see our mom like I do. I understand it a little better now, but I always knew there was a divide between them. He’s good to her, and they talk, but he’s still the first one to pull away when she hugs him.

“Does he love her?”

He would lie to me and say yes. Tate would know the truth.

“I honestly can’t answer that,” she tells me. “There’s a lot Jared doesn’t talk about. He and Katherine kind of grew up together, and he definitely could’ve had it better as a kid. A lot better. But . . .” She pauses, finding her words. “I think he also realizes that everyone does things they regret, and while she’ll never be able to erase the mistakes she made with him, she’s not making the same ones anymore. She’s been a great mom to you, she’s a wonderful grandmother, and she’s there for Jared when he decides he needs her.”

Yeah. I guess that’s all true. She’s nothing with me like she is with him in the book.

“Why are you asking about this?” Tate brushes my hair behind my ear.

I shake my head, reaching into my bag and taking out *Next to Never*.

“This book is messing with my head.” I hand it over to her, letting her see it.



She studies the front and back cover and opens it up, scanning a random page. “So strange.”

“Yeah, I can’t figure out who wrote it. I asked Juliet, since she’s the only writer I know and she wouldn’t lie to me, so . . .”

Tate continues reading a part, her expression turning thoughtful. “Hmmm . . .”

“What?”

She inhales a deep breath and closes the book, handing it back to me. “It’s very personal, isn’t it? Like whoever wrote it actually lived it.”

*What?*

“What do you mean?”

She pushes off the car and stands up, looking at me. “Occam’s razor,” she says, referring to the scientific theory. “The simplest explanation is usually the correct one.”

The simplest explanation. I let my eyes fall closed as realization hits.

*Of course.*

\*\*\*

*Kat . . .*

“Jared!” I shouted up the stairs. “Dinner’s ready!”

I rounded the bannister, bumping into the accent table along the wall. “Ow!” I whisper-yelled.

I dashed back into the kitchen and took the milk out of the refrigerator, pausing. Does he drink milk? Probably not.

Well, he should drink it, anyway. I plopped it down on the table, blinking away the blur in my eyes.

The timer on the stove finally beeped, and I grabbed a pot holder and opened the oven, taking out the frozen lasagna. I set it on top of the stove, knocking down a pan on top. I jumped right as it hit the floor at my feet.

“Hey.”

I spun around, seeing Madoc Caruthers standing in the entrance to the kitchen. It still unnerved me, seeing him around my house. Not because I knew his father a lot more than he knew I did, but because he’d hate me for his mother’s sake if he ever found out about my past.

Jared would hate me, too.

“Hi,” I finally forced out, turning back around. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“Jared’s changing,” he explained. “He said I had to leave the room.”

Oookay.

I threw the dishcloth over my shoulder and took a sip of my wine. I was still in my work clothes—a burgundy dress—and walking around barefoot as I rushed to get dinner done. I’d gone out with a few friends after work—a few drinks—but I’d cut my plans short, trying to make an effort and be home.

“Okay, are you staying for dinner?” I asked.

“Uh . . .” He glanced back at the stairs, and I could hear Jared pounding down the steps. Madoc turned back to me. “It looks great, actually, but I think we’re heading out.”

“What?”

Jared swept into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. “We already ate,” he informed me.

“Jared?” I threw the cloth down, anger creeping up. “I canceled my plans to be home.”

“I should thank my lucky stars.” He tipped back the carton of orange juice, gulping it down.

“That’s enough,” I miffed. “Madoc is welcome to stay, but you are sitting down and eating. You’re not going anywhere.”

He tossed the carton back into the fridge, wiping his mouth with the sleeve of his hoodie. “Jax called, and he needs me. I’ll

be home late.”

Pivoting around without so much as a look in my direction, he headed out of the kitchen, Madoc following close behind.

“You know, you could make an effort here,” I said, not caring that his friend would overhear. “My entire world does not revolve around you.”

Jared laughed. “Did it ever?”

And he opened the door, walking out, and Madoc closed the door behind them.

I stood there, staring at the door and listening to his car engine roar in the driveway before he sped off down the street.

He just left. Like anything I had to say didn’t matter.

God, he hated me. He didn’t even fight with me anymore. He. Just. Didn’t. Care.

I rushed for the freezer, taking out the bottle of vodka inside. The clear alcohol swished in the chilled container like thick oil, and I threw off the top, not seeing where it landed.

I took a swig of the bottle, tears wetting my lashes as I squeezed my eyes shut. He doesn’t hate me.

I took another drink and groaned, savoring the warmth of the alcohol coating my stomach. Tomorrow will be fine.

And I started sobbing, taking gulp after gulp after gulp, because I knew I was lying to myself.

There was no coming back from this.

I dragged my feet into the living room, carrying the nearly empty bottle in my hand, then I collapsed on the couch. The sweet oblivion fogged my brain so much, I saw Jase smiling down at me. He kissed the corner of my mouth, under my ear, and the corner of my eye, whispering in my ear.

“Katherine?”

The world shook, and I jerked, feeling like I was falling.

“Katherine, wake up,” a male voice said, and I felt a fist squeezing my stomach as the nausea rolled like a wave through me.

I shoved at the hands, convulsing. “I don’t feel good. Leave me alone.”

I heard footsteps walk away and then come back before hands grabbed me and flipped me over. Something was shoved into my mouth, and I felt fingers press against the back of my throat. I gagged, feeling the pressure of everything coming up from my stomach as I coughed and heaved.

“No,” I grunted, but it was too late.

Everything I’d drunk came pouring out, and I grabbed the small garbage can in front of me, emptying my stomach, coughing and sputtering as my gut wrenched. The vomit burned my throat, and I heaved again, feeling like someone was twisting a knife into my stomach.

“Oh, my God,” I gasped, wiping my mouth on my sleeve. “What are you doing?”

I coughed, spitting out any remnants from my mouth. Blinking through the tears in my eyes, I finally noticed James, Tate’s dad, standing above me.

“Jared’s been arrested,” he said.

I stopped breathing. “What?” And I scrambled to grab my phone on the end table, swiping the screen to check for messages.

There was nothing. Not even a missed call.

“He called you?” I asked, turning my eyes on him in question. My son didn’t call me?

James simply handed me a towel to clean myself up and walked around me, toward the front door. “I called a judge I know at home. He assigned Jared a bail instead of waiting for court in the morning. Hurry up. I’ll drive you.”

Ten minutes later, we walked into the police station, my gross hair tucked into a ponytail under a baseball hat, and I'd changed out of my vomit-stained clothes and into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

It was past midnight, and James hadn't been able to tell me how long Jared had been here. He'd left our house around six, I think. Maybe it was earlier? I shook my head, trying to clear away the fuzz and fogginess of the night. The alcohol and the vomiting had wreaked havoc with my balance, and I couldn't stop the tips of my fingers from buzzing.

The station was quiet and nearly empty, but I spotted Madoc sitting on the chairs. As soon as he saw me, he rose out of his chair.

But I shot out my hand, stopping him. "I don't want to talk to you. Go sit down."

His face fell a little, but he sat back down and kept quiet. In all honesty, I knew Jared had most likely gotten himself into this, but the last possible person I wanted to see, other than Jase Caruthers, was his son right now.

Stepping up to the counter, I called to the female officer standing by her desk.

"Jared Trent is my son," I told her. "Where is he?"

"He's fine," she answered, approaching the counter and looking like this wasn't at all urgent for her. "He's in the back. Bail is fifteen hundred. Pretty cheap for this, actually." She sounded unhappy about that. I guess James's judge friend did us a favor. "You can pay it with the cashier."

And she jerked her head to the side, indicating another counter at a window down the hall.

"What happened?"

"He attacked a man named Vincent Donovan, apparently the foster father of his brother?"

I let my eyes fall, thinking. "Uh, I think so. I don't know."

Jared had a half brother named Jax, whom he met the summer I let him visit his father when he was fourteen. I wasn't sure who his foster parents were, though. I'd never thought to reach out.

The boy was only a year or so younger, and my suspicions must have been right. Thomas had been screwing around while we were still together. In fact, the boys were so close in age, Thomas must've gotten her pregnant not long after Jared was born.

Jax's mother split early on, and since Thomas was in jail, Jax was in foster care. I thought about taking him in, but I obviously couldn't parent the one kid I had, so that was out of the question. Right now, anyway.

"Well," the officer explained, "he claimed the man was abusing his brother, so he retaliated. The victim has three broken ribs and is in surgery right now for internal bleeding. He should be fine. Luckily."

"Victim," I sneered, repeating her term as I tried wiping the dizziness out of my eyes.

Who else rushed to protect Jax when that asshole hurt him? Jared, that's who.

And who rushed to protect Jared when his father beat the shit out of him two years ago?

No one.

I moved my arm and accidentally knocked my purse to the floor. James bent down to snatch it back up.

The clerk pinned me with a stare. "Are you drunk?"

I squared my shoulders and glared at her, taking my purse back from Tate's dad.

"My son is a good kid," I told her, ignoring her question.

She nodded, looking sarcastic. "I'm sure you did your best."

She turned and walked away, and I stood frozen, left with no words. What was I going to say? *You're wrong? I don't have to explain myself to you?*

*Because, you know, Kat, your son's sitting in a cell, and you had no idea where he was or what he was doing. He stays out at all hours; he could be drinking and driving or getting someone pregnant, and he does whatever he wants for one simple reason.*

*He can. He barely has any parents, and that is something you do have to answer for.*

We walked down the hall to the cashier, while Madoc remained quiet, but I could tell he was watching me. I paid the bail, barely able to sign the papers, because I was shaking so hard.

"It'll take a while to process," the clerk told me. "You can wait in the chairs."

"What happens now?" I asked.

"Well, your son will be given a date to appear in court. You'll need a lawyer."

I closed my eyes, exhaling a small cry as I turned away. "Lawyer," I repeated, whispering to myself. "This isn't happening."

"I can call my dad." Madoc approached. "He's in the city, but he can be here in the morning. He'll be able to get Jared out of this."

"No," I shot out. "Thanks, but I'll handle this."

He just stood there for a moment, looking like he wanted to argue but thought better of it.

All of us walked to the chairs and took our seats, Madoc giving me space and sitting a few chairs down.

James leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. "I don't know which judge his case will be assigned to, but I can talk

to the one I know and see if I can work something out,” he suggested. “It’s his first offense, and I know he’s a good kid.”

I nodded, giving him my permission, but my mind was already racing ahead. What would life be like in five years?

I took the house all those years ago for Jared. For him to have a better life. But it seemed all my fears were coming true.

Where would we be in the next few years? Would Jared be in college? Would I be married to a man who loved me and curled up on the couch to watch TV with me every night? Would Jared let me hug him?

Would everything be completely different and we’d all suddenly have the perfect life and family?

No. Everything would be exactly the same, only worse. Jared would be in jail, like his father, because I’d abandoned and neglected him, and it was my fault Jared was here.

I took my phone out of my purse, my fingers hovering over the numbers, because I didn’t want to go backward, but if this was my one chance to help my son . . .

“I should call Jase,” I mumbled, giving in.

“Jase Caruthers?” James asked. “That kid’s father, right?”

I glanced at Madoc, his face buried in his phone, and nodded.

James plucked my phone out of my hand and held it securely. “You don’t need him,” he maintained. “Let me try to deal with this.”

“Why? Why do you want to help?”

He looked like he was searching for words. “Because I love Jared,” he admitted. “He’s a little shit, but I care what happens to him.” He handed my phone back. “You don’t need Jase Caruthers. You have friends. We’ll handle this.”

I squeezed the phone, meeting his eyes. Did he know? Jase and I had stopped seeing each other a few months after James



and Tate moved in next door. Had he seen Jase there, coming in late?

Christ. What he must think of me.

“Jared’s been falling apart for a long time,” James spoke softly, careful not to let Madoc hear. “I kept my mouth shut out of respect, because I didn’t feel it was my place, but every kid needs at least one person to think that the world rises and sets with them, and I don’t think . . .”

I swallowed the knot in my throat, both of us finishing his sentence in our heads.

“Tate was that for him,” James pointed out, “but they don’t talk anymore, and Jared has only gotten worse. He needs help.”

I nodded, staring out at the linoleum floor. And what had I said to him tonight?

*My world doesn’t revolve around you?*

*Did it ever?*

His words washed over me, and I was fucking paralyzed. All these years I knew what I was doing. To myself and to him. This wasn’t some goddamn epiphany, but for the first time I realized that I was more to blame for how he saw the world and how he behaved than his father. He was angry before I let Thomas see him. He hated me before that summer. He’d been pulling away his entire life.

No one should’ve come before him, and it wasn’t that he didn’t care that I’d always put myself first . . . No, he didn’t even wonder why anymore. This was his life. I was his horrible reality, not his father.

I chewed my bottom lip, shaking my head. “I was his for so long that I didn’t know who I was without him.” Of course I referred to Jase, hoping James understood. “Why was I so weak?”

“Because we all eat lies when our hearts are hungry,” he quoted.

I closed my eyes and allowed the quiet tears to spill over. Yeah. Jase didn't take anything I didn't freely give. And if it wasn't him or Thomas, it would've been someone else.

"I need to get well," I finally said.

"That's easy to say, isn't it?" he retorted. "The truth is, you have two choices here. Jared can stay with me while you're in rehab. Or Jared can stay with me for good."

I darted my eyes up to him.

"And you can leave him for his own well-being while you go off to drink for however long your body allows you stay alive to do so," he concluded.

I covered my eyes with my hands, breaking down once again as I shook with sobs and sank to rock bottom, feeling naked, cold, worthless, and empty.

*Oh, my God.*

I didn't want that. Of course, I didn't want that! I never wanted to stop being his mom.

But James was right. Jared would be worlds better off with him than he was with me.

While I cried and cried and cried, James remained quiet and let me come to terms with what had to be done.

"I love my son," I told him, wiping the tears from my face.

"Then prove it to him."

## Chapter 11

*Kat . . .*

I stood in the next-door neighbor's garage, leaning down and affixing the wires to the new taillight, locking them in place, and popping the new cover back into position. I had no idea what had happened to this car, but when I left for rehab, James had a mint-condition Chevy Nova sitting in his garage. Now the car was nearly totaled, and Jared was over here working on it nonstop.

When I asked, James simply assured me Jared wasn't responsible for the damage.

I had to hand it to James. In the month I'd been away, he'd straightened Jared out and gotten him on track. His schoolwork was done, his grades were slowly improving, and he was making an effort to be civil with me, even if we still rarely spoke.

I did what I could do to bridge the gap. Nothing would fix all the wrongs I'd committed, but I wasn't going to stop trying. One day when Jared went next door in his spare time to work on restoring the car, I inched my way in and asked James if I could help, as well. And now, after a few weeks, Jared and I still weren't friendly, but he accepted my presence and I got to be close to him, so I took what I could get.

Soon, though, I feared the car would be done and he'd find more trouble to get into. Especially when Tate came back from her year abroad next summer. I wasn't sure what happened between them when they were fourteen and suddenly stopped being friends, but maybe this distance would be good for him.

I just hoped that shit wouldn't hit the fan again when she finally came home.

"All righty, that's done," I said, straightening and dusting off my hands on my jeans.

"Here, hold this," Jared requested, his tone clipped.

I walked around the front of the car and took the hose he handed me, the black, grainy grease staining my fingers.

He worked the wrench, tightening a notch.

“Don’t make it too tight,” I warned him.

“I know what I’m doing.”

And so do I. You’re making it too tight.

But I wouldn’t say that.

Just then, as I knew would happen, the notch snapped, and I heard metal pieces fall down into the engine.

“Damn it,” he growled in a low voice before standing up and snatching the hose away from me as if it was my fault.

I remained silent, like I hadn’t noticed. “Okay,” I said, realizing this was my cue. “I’m going to run and get us all some burgers and stop by Miller’s for the bulbs for the dash. I’ll be back soon.”

He ignored me as usual, and I grabbed the shop cloth, wiping off my hands and sticking it in my back pocket as I left the garage. The weather was turning chilly, but we could still get away with T-shirts and no jackets.

I didn’t want to admit it to Jared, because he would think I was trying to suck up to him, but getting under the hood of a car again felt really good. It felt like the old me, and I hadn’t realized how much I’d tried to be someone else for too long. I was sober, I had a good job that had waited for me to get clean, and my son was safe and healthy.

I might still feel the loneliness, and Jase may still cross my mind every day, several times a day, but I had to be thankful for what was good and keep moving forward. I was still young, after all. I still wanted to do things.

Climbing into my car, barely even blinking at the smudges of grease on my jeans and fitted gray T-shirt, I tightened my messy bun and slipped on my sunglasses, deciding to head to Miller’s first.

Jared usually handled any repairs on my car, so he was in here a lot. Me, not since he was small.

“Kat!” Deena beamed, holding out her arms as I walked into the store. “Damn, girl. Where’ve you been?”

I smiled, stretching over the counter to give her a hug. She’d worked here since her youngest started school, and I knew her boys loved it. They mooched off her discount. I knew Jared raced out at the Loop, but I wasn’t sure if he’d ever run into her son, Nate. They were the same age.

“Hanging in there,” I told her. I didn’t care to mention my stint in rehab, but she probably already knew. We’d fallen out of touch in the past couple of years, but it wasn’t a big town, and news traveled quickly.

“Jared is repairing James Brandt’s Chevy Nova,” I explained. “Do you have bulbs for the dash lights?”

“That’s a ’71, right?” she asked, probably remembering from all the trips James and Jared had made here already this fall. “You can take a look. If we don’t have them, I can order them.”

“Thanks.”

Walking down the aisles, I scanned the parts and finally found the bulbs I thought they would need. If I was wrong, they were cheap, so no big deal. Seeing the bulbs for the dome light, I grabbed that as well, just in case.

“I can’t it make it look like new,” I heard a male voice whine. “Not like they do at the repair shop.”

I smiled, recognizing Madoc’s voice pretty well by now.

He was over at our place frequently, and I’d thought it would be hard to be around him, but he was so unlike his father. So cheerful and happy, always making jokes. Plus, he was Jared’s only real friend, and I couldn’t take that away from him.

Stepping around the corner, I saw him standing at a selection of spray paints, buffers, and other tools. Jase stood

with him, both of them dressed casually, since it was Saturday. My heart picked up pace, but I simply took a deep breath and forced myself to relax again.

“I’m not paying for repairs every time you dent up your car at the Loop,” Jase barked. “You can learn how to fix your own dents, damn it. If I knew you were going to be racing with this thing, I would’ve bought you a piece-of-crap Honda.”

“Ugh.” Madoc frowned. “I love you so much more when you just give me your credit card.”

“Yeah,” Jase mused. “Like I’ve never heard that from either of my wives.”

Madoc snorted, breaking out in a laugh, and Jase smiled in turn, sharing the joke with him.

“I’m sorry,” he rushed to add. “I love your mother. You know that.”

Madoc shook his head. “I’m going to go check out tires.”

“You just got new tires.”

“I’m just looking,” Madoc assured, disappearing around the corner.

I stared at Jase’s back as he watched Madoc go, my heart still thundering but my breathing remained calm.

I knew I should turn around and walk away, but a larger part of me knew I could do this. I had to do this. Running, hiding, avoiding anything difficult . . . that was my past. Jase was only as dangerous as I let him be.

He’d made good on my request all those years ago. Other than the phone call after we’d picked up Jared and Madoc at school freshman year, he’d left me alone. He wasn’t a threat, and I wasn’t going to make him one. Our sons were friends, and I wasn’t going to let our past interfere with that. It was high time Jared stopped paying for my mistakes.

We could be civil and move past this.

“Hello,” I spoke up.

He twisted his head toward me, standing still as I approached with the two small packages in my hand.

“Hey.” His eyes fell down my clothes, and I suddenly remembered that I was absolutely filthy. Awesome. Every woman’s fantasy to see your ex with flyaways spilling out of your bun, grease stains on your hands and clothes and probably streaked across your face, too.

“Yeah, I know.” I laughed at myself. “I’m a mess.”

He swallowed hard and shook his head. “I wasn’t going to say that.”

I noticed the spray can and a couple of other bottles tucked in his arm, and I gestured to them. “Looks like your boy’s costing you about as much as mine is costing me.”

“Yeah.” He nodded absently, looking like he barely heard me. “I . . . I heard Jared’s helping repair James’s car.”

“Something to keep him busy,” I explained, knowing that Jase probably knew about Jared’s arrest from Madoc. “He’s staying out of trouble now. I’m not sure he’s okay, but he’s better.” And then I looked away, feeling guilty again. “I did a lot wrong with him.”

“Yeah, well,” he replied, looking somber. “Madoc hasn’t been a piece of cake, either. He keeps a lot buried and just puts on a good show.”

Yeah, I wouldn’t know about that. I always knew when Jared was ready to lose it. But I could imagine it was just as frustrating to try to communicate with a child who lied to you about what they were feeling, too.

“You’re doing well?” he asked, moving closer.

His scent drifted over me, and I held my breath, afraid of the attraction for a moment.

“Yeah,” I replied. “I’m doing great. I’m a managing partner of the accounting firm now, and I . . .” I laughed at myself, kind of embarrassed, “I got it in my head that I’d try to run a half marathon next spring, so I’m trying to get in shape.”

Actually, anything to keep me busy. Anything to keep me from being bored and thinking too much.

Jase held my eyes, and drew in a deep breath.

“And you?” I asked. “How’ve you been?”

But he didn’t seem to hear me. His hand drifted toward me and reached my neck, and I stilled as his thumb rubbed at a spot there.

His chest rose and fell in heavy breaths, and he seemed mesmerized. Pulling his hand away, he rubbed his thumb over his fingers, staring at it. “Grease,” he explained.

Flutters hit my stomach, but I steeled myself.

*It will never be over.* I heard his words in my head. I blinked long and hard.

*No.*

Opening my eyes, I forced a smile and returned the favor, giving him a once-over and taking in his blue cargo shorts and white polo shirt.

“What are you wearing?” I asked.

His eyebrows pinched together in confusion, and he looked down at his clothes. “Nothing. It’s just a . . . golf polo, I guess.”

“You don’t golf.”

“Things could’ve changed,” he shot back, joking with me. “Why? You don’t like it? I’m told it’s fashionable.”

“It’s not.”

I turned around and scanned the clothing, sifting through the coveralls and aprons, finding the T-shirt selection. I knew Jase owned T-shirts, but they were the sixty-five-dollar kind from Ralph Lauren.

Picking up a gray one that probably only cost ten bucks, I tossed it to him.



“Your shoulders are one of your best features,” I told him. “Keep it simple. Women don’t want a man who looks like he’d screw them on twenty-four-hundred-dollar sheets, Jase.” I mocked. “They want a man who looks like he’d bend them over a kitchen table.”

His eyebrow shot up, and all of a sudden he didn’t look nervous anymore.

“Remember,” I taunted. “They marry the lawyer. They screw the plumber.”

He laughed, but his eyes turned heated, and he took a step forward, looking like he’d just been challenged and he was accepting.

“Is that right?” he responded. “Because I seem to remember someone saying how good those sheets felt on her twenty-first birthday.” And then he shrugged. “But I guess that was my imagination.”

I offered him a nervous smile and began retreating as he inched into my space. Yeah, I shouldn’t have joked with him about this. Maybe we could be civil for our sons’ sakes, but moving up to banter had escalated things too fast. Those sheets had felt great, but I wasn’t ready to remember that right now.

We stood chest to chest, everything from so long ago flooding back to swamp me. His eyes hovering down over me, his smell, the heat of his body . . .

“It comes back so easily, doesn’t it?” I mused.

He stared down at me. “It never left.”

Reaching out, he held my face in his hand. “I’ve dialed your number thousands of times,” he whispered. “And every time I forced myself to hang up, I wanted to fucking break everything around me.”

He leaned in, his shaky, hot breath falling on my lips.

But I turned my head. “I can’t.”

“I know.” He hovered over my mouth.

And then he dropped his eyes, a hint of sadness in them. “I’ll always love you, Kat.”

I nodded, feeling old tears well up. “I know.” I pulled away, forcing a weak smile. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have teased you. Old habits die hard, I guess.”

But not too hard.

I paid for my items and left the store, still feeling the heartbreak, but reassured that I was finally strong enough to walk away.

• • •

*Jase . . .*

The rain pummeled my windshield as I sat in my car, outside her house. Madoc had gone home to work on his car, and I’d been driving around, cruising every street except for Fall Away Lane. I couldn’t stand to be home. I didn’t want to see my office, my bed, or all the photos on the wall of a fictitious life I’d invented. All the pictures of me smiling through the lies I’d been living for forty-two years.

Stepping out my car, I walked through the downpour, not caring that I was getting drenched as I climbed the steps of her porch.

This was supposed to be my house. The house I was going to live in when I married her, and if I’d had the guts to do what I wanted to do from the moment she was nineteen and slapped me in the face, calling me an asshole, we’d be here with a house full of kids, and I wouldn’t hate myself so much.

Sacrifices and decisions aren’t hard for good people. For selfish ones like me, they’re hard until they’re no longer yours to make.

For people like me, we don’t truly realize what we want until the choice is taken away. Only then do we know.

I knocked on the door, a knot in my throat as I waited for her to answer. When the door opened, though, it was Jared looking at me. Dressed in a black hoodie and flipping his keys

around his fingers as a little Boston terrier stood at his feet, he looked up at me with interest.

“Hey,” he said. “Madoc’s not here.”

“Yes, I know. I’m not looking for Madoc.”

His eyes narrowed on me, and I immediately wanted to shrink. I didn’t know how he did that, but I half expected him to back me up out the door and send me on my way.

Instead, though, he didn’t press. “Mom?” he called behind him. “I’m going to go visit Jax.”

“Okay,” I heard her reply. “Be careful driving.”

Jared tipped his chin at me and left the door open as he walked around me, the dog racing after him and both of them hopping into a black Mustang. I walked into the house, and before I closed the door, I heard his engine fire up. I was sure I had him to thank for getting Madoc into cars and racing.

Or him to blame.

The house was dim, the glow of a few lamps shining in the living room and family room. I continued down the hall toward the kitchen, hearing Kat move around in there. New pictures lined the walls, and I also saw that she had painted the living room and added some new bookshelves.

As I stopped at the entryway to the kitchen, I watched her at the sink, and it looked like she was peeling potatoes.

I slipped my hands in my pockets and took her in, remembering all the times I had just stood and watched her in the past. I loved to see her move around the house, making pancakes or putting laundry away or cooking dinner. I pretended that she was mine and I could stay forever and this was our life.

She moved her foot behind her ankle, scratching it with her toe, and the sudden desire to touch her was almost too much. She’d changed into a clean pair of jeans with a white shirt, and her hair was down.

Turning off the water, she grabbed the hand towel and wiped off her hands before spinning around.

Locking eyes with me, she let out a little gasp. “Jase.”

I held her gaze, having no fucking clue what I was doing or what I wanted to tell her, except everything.

I inhaled a long breath and looked down, because I needed to find my words, and I couldn’t do that staring at her.

“When I was four,” I told her, “I walked in on my father with another woman.” I finally raised my eyes, seeing her holding the towel as if frozen in the middle of drying her hands. “I don’t remember much, but I still have the image, and for the longest time, I thought maybe I imagined it or it was a dream that had stuck with me.” I leaned against the door frame and kept going. “And then when I was sixteen I saw him touch my mother’s best friend at a party when he didn’t know anyone was looking. My mom knew. She knew everything. And still she constantly put on a brave face, trying to act like everything was fine and we were the perfect family.”

Her eyes shifted from side to side, hopefully absorbing what I hadn’t shared with anyone.

“I promised myself I would never do that to my family,” I explained. “I would never become my father. But then I met you, and I knew. You were the girl I was going to love.” My chest tightened, and I had to force the words out. “So I deluded myself. I told myself I wasn’t him. That I had good reasons for doing what I was doing. I was keeping my family together for my kid, doing what was best for him. I needed you. I kept telling myself that. I was falling apart, and what we had was special. You were the only one, after all. It wasn’t like I was a serial cheater. I wasn’t him.”

Tears pooled in her beautiful brown eyes, and I was fucking lost. God, I felt weak.

I licked my dry lips and continued, “And then one day, years ago, Madoc answered my cell phone, and it was you calling. I was so angry, I yelled at him. I saw me, four years

old, all over again. He couldn't find out, I told myself. He couldn't look at me the way I looked at my dad. He wouldn't understand. I couldn't be a failure to him. He had to love me," I gritted out, pain wracking my body, because I could still feel everything that tore me and her apart.

She clutched the towel in her hands, listening.

"The truth is," I said, feeling my eyes grow thick with tears. "I knew what I should do, what I wanted to do, but I was afraid of being a failure, not realizing I became one anyway."

I rushed forward and held her head in my hands, rubbing circles on her cheeks.

"I should've let Maddie go and been with you and only you," I admitted. "I should've moved you into my house and made you my wife and had you in my bed every damn day." I leaned down, nose to nose as her breath shook with silent tears. "I should've married you years ago, and Madoc and Jared would've grown up with two loving parents."

I took her lips in mine, the pain of sixteen years replaced with the hunger that was always between us. I would always need her because she made me feel alive and she expected more from me than anyone in my life other than my son. She made me want to be better, and while I had always failed her and never fought to keep her, that would end today. I didn't want to wake up to another day without her.

"I'm miserable," I told her. "Seeing you today hit me like a truck. Every day I spend without you, I'm miserable. And maybe it's what I deserve, but I'm so sorry I never gave you what you needed. I'm sorry I treated you badly for so long."

I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her into me, burying my face in her neck and scent, holding her to my body.

"Marry me," I whispered.

"You're already married," she pointed out.

“I left her,” I admitted. “Months ago. She’s moved out, and I’m working on the divorce. I love you, and I don’t want to waste another day.”

She pulled back, her hands cupping the back of my neck as she peered up at me. “Why now? After all this time?”

“Because seeing you today was when I realized that I couldn’t hurt you anymore,” I admitted. “You’re stronger, and maybe . . . just maybe . . . I won’t be bad for you. Maybe I don’t have to feel so ashamed for what I did to you and force myself to stay away.”

Her eyes glistened. “I’m not ready.”

“Do you still love me?” I asked, barely a whisper. Because that was all I needed to hear.

“Yes.”

I kissed her again, long but soft, savoring the feel of her lips and her in my arms.

“When I come back for you, it will be forever,” I told her, releasing her and backing away. I had to leave now before I pushed her too fast and made another mistake. “Tell me it’s not over.”

She held on to the sink behind her, her chin trembling, but then she finally gave me a small smile, and said, “I guess we’ll see.”

I turned and walked out the door, the feel of her still coursing under my skin.

I’d take that challenge.

## Chapter 12

Racing into the police station, I hold the door open for Fallon as she ushers A.J. through ahead of her, and we all hurry inside.

They're not hurt. If they were hurt, they'd be in the hospital, not the police station.

After we make it through the second set of doors—heavy wooden ones—I spot Jared at the counter with Tate, while their son, James, sits on a black cushioned chair, playing with one of his parents' phones.

“What happened?” I burst out, hoping he just leads with “they're okay.”

Jared turns around, speaking to me but glaring at the cops behind the counter. “They won't tell us,” he growls and then speaks directly to a female cop who's rounding her desk. “I want my kid!”

“Jared, calm down,” she scolds, sticking a file folder in a tray on a desk. “She's perfectly fine. As soon as Madoc and Jax get here, we'll bring them out.”

He shoves at a piece of paper sitting on the counter, sending it floating to the floor, and scowls at her before walking away.

“Don't make me remind you what the inside of my cells look like, boy!” a burly cop with a double chin and white hair barks at Jared from behind the woman.

Jared's eyebrows come together and he folds his arms across his chest, but he shuts up. If I weren't so worried, I'd laugh. After reading and learning what I have tonight, I realize what I don't know about my brothers could probably fill a stadium.

Just then, Madoc and Jax storm through the door, Juliet right behind them, and everyone goes straight for the counter.

“Barry!” Madoc calls to the old cop who scolded Jared.

The man finishes talking to another officer and makes his way over to us. A.J. and James sit on the chairs, playing on the phone. The rest of us are crowded into the counter.

“The kids are fine. No one’s hurt, and you can take them home tonight.”

“What happened?” Jax speaks up.

“Kade happened,” Barry the Cop answers, arching an eyebrow. “Did Dylan have a scuffle at her race tonight?”

Jax nodded. “Yeah, some kid ran her off the track. He won’t be racing there again.”

“No, I doubt he will,” the officer rushes to agree, sounding sarcastic. “Your kids—and I imagine they had more help—dug a wide but shallow grave on Weston’s football field. They stole the kid’s car, drove it into the hole, and buried it. They even made a nice little tombstone for it.”

Snorts go off around the group, and I stifle laughter as Tate covers her amusement with her hand. Jared, Madoc, and Jax struggle not to smile.

Of course they’re proud. Of course.

“This isn’t funny,” the officer bites out.

“It’s a little funny,” Madoc mumbles, avoiding the officer’s eyes like a naughty child.

“Well,” Barry goes on, giving Madoc a sinister smile, “let’s see how you take this news then. When the boy found out, he and his friends chased them into town, and your kids offered a rematch right here on our city streets. Kade, Hawke, and Dylan, at least,” he specifies.

I imagine Hunter was only along to make sure Kade didn’t do anything that would get Dylan hurt.

“Things escalated,” he continues, “three cars were sideswiped, and your old Boss”—he looks at Jared—“is presently sitting in Ducane’s Ice Cream Shop after your daughter crashed it right through the huge bay window. “



“Oh, my God!” Tate bursts out, looking scared.

But the cop holds up a hand. “She’s fine,” he assures. “Thankfully, the shop was empty at the time, too, so no one got hurt.” And then he fixes his eyes on Madoc. “But I’ve got lots of angry parents calling, Madoc. There were people on those streets tonight.”

Madoc drops his eyes, his amusement gone. He, Jared, and Jax all look a little repentant, because they know the cop has a point. It’s all fun and games until someone gets hurt.

Someone’s life could’ve been forever changed tonight, because Kade—and I have absolutely no doubt this was all his idea—thinks he’s untouchable.

“Now the boy’s dad is Kurt Rhomberg,” Officer Barry goes on, speaking to Madoc, “so he’s not pressing charges out of respect for you, but he will expect that you take care of the damages to his son’s car. As well as the estimated forty grand in other damages your kids caused tonight.”

He says the last piece to all of the parents, and Madoc digs his thumb and middle finger into his eyes, rubbing them, while Jared combs his hand through his hair.

“Christ,” I hear someone growl under their breath.

Forty thousand dollars. *Shit*. Officer Barry just served a big, heaping dose of reality, and everyone is shutting up now.

“And out of respect for all of you,” he says, “I won’t take their licenses. But if there’s a next time, they’ll be riding the bus for the rest of their lives.”

Madoc nods, looking contrite, and asks, “Of course. Can we see them now?”

“We have them in a room. I’ll get them.”

“No,” Madoc shoots back. “Leave them there. We need to talk to them first.”

“Right now?” Fallon questions him.

But he just ignores her. All seven of us trail to the back of the station, A.J. and little James staying with a police officer, as we follow Barry. But when he stops and opens the door to one of the interview rooms, a flood of shouting and furniture scraping against the floor hits us, and all I can see is the cop and Madoc rushing into the room, pulling Hunter off Kade, who's backed against the wall and bleeding from his mouth.

"Oh, my God," Juliet breathes out.

She quickly pushes past me, into the room, and rushes for Hawke, who's bending over with his hands on his knees and breathing hard like he was trying to break up the fight.

We all hurry in, and I close the door behind me as Tate and Jared rush for Dylan, who's standing behind Hawke and looking like she's about to cry while Jax picks up the chairs that have toppled over.

Hunter is panting and glaring at Kade as he tries to yank himself out of his father's grasp. "She could've been killed! You're a piece of shit!"

"Come on, you little bitch!" Kade holds out his arms, begging for more.

"Enough!" Madoc bellows, pulling tighter on Hunter. "What the hell is the matter with the both of you?"

Kade moves closer to his brother, threatening his space and unwilling to back down, but then Jared is there, staring down at Kade, walking into him and forcing him back again. Kade's jaw flexes as he stares up at his uncle, but he finally drops his glare and stops.

Everyone is damn near hyperventilating, but slowly everything starts to calm down. Hunter stops fighting against his father's hold, and Hawke is resting against the wall, looking exhausted.

When Madoc lets go of Hunter, he comes to stand between his sons and looks back and forth at both of them. "What the hell? You both realize that 'mayor' is an elected position, correct?"

The police officer chuckles, and I realize I haven't even thought about that. Everything that happened tonight could hurt Madoc's campaign—not that his career comes first, but it won't look good when Madoc can't even keep his children in line.

"I think we should just take them all home," Tate says, Dylan's face buried in her neck. "It's late."

"Yes, let's sort through this tomorrow," Fallon adds.

But Madoc just shakes his head. "No. Everyone over here." He points in front of the table. "Now!"

I jump, noticing a vein on his temple and his face getting red. I've hardly ever heard Madoc get angry. I've seen him get frustrated in the garage or yell at Jared or Jax, but he rarely gets pissed like this.

Hawke, Kade, and Dylan round the table, standing in front of it, while Hunter lurks behind them, everyone silent.

Behind me, the police officer leaves the room, quietly closing the door behind him.

Madoc stares at the kids, shaking his head. "You know what? You've all had it made," he tells them. "You've had the very best of what we could give you. Loving, supportive two-parent households, family vacations, phones, iPads, clothes, cars . . . You were spoiled!"

I glance at the others, my brothers and their wives, and see them all listening. No one has a problem that Madoc is yelling at their kids.

"And we knew," Madoc went on. "We knew this would happen, but, for some reason, we couldn't not give you those things. How were we supposed to withhold anything that made you happy? We just thought you'd learn some goddamn humility. We thought you'd learn how to be grateful for everything you have."

Dylan and Hawke are avoiding his eyes, looking contrite, while Kade is still scowling, and Hunter's fists are balled up,

both of the twins looking angry.

But they're quiet.

"And we were no better at your age," Madoc continues. "But we did know that some things couldn't be replaced. Not everything is disposable." And then he looks over at Fallon, his voice growing quiet. "You only learn that lesson through loss, and that is something you kids have never known. Not one of you."

He draws in a deep breath and crosses his arms over his chest. "I think it's time you all start learning that lesson. You have two choices," he bites out. "You're too destructive together. Hawke graduates in a year, so let him and Dylan stay put, but my boys can switch schools—"

"What?!" Hawke bursts out.

"No—" Dylan follows, standing up straight and looking suddenly worried.

"That's crazy!" I hear Tate say.

"Or . . .," Madoc interjects, because he's not done. "You all can take your punishment and build some goddamn character if you want to stay together."

"Yes," Dylan answers quickly. "Don't send them away."

Madoc can't tell Jared and Jax what to do with their own kids, but nonetheless, Dylan and Hawke aren't toxic together anyway. They don't need to be separated.

But I'm sure that, even though Hunter and Kade are destructive together, he doesn't want them separated. They're brothers, after all. And maybe, just maybe, he figures taking them out of Shelburne Falls and away from certain "distractions" will solve their problems.

Ideally, though, that's a last resort. This is everyone's home, and we all belong together.

"You all owe about forty grand in damages, so what are you going to do?" Madoc asks.

Dylan speaks up. “We’ll pay it.”

“Oh, you’ll pay it,” Jared repeats in a humorous tone. “Will that be Visa or MasterCard?”

“We’ll pay it out of our college funds and then we’ll work to put the money back,” she clarifies.

Madoc nods. “What else?”

“Curfew by ten?” Kade offers.

But Madoc just laughs, his chest shaking as he turns to Jared. “That’s cute,” he tells him. “They actually think they’re allowed outside of the house besides work and school.” And then he turns to face Kade. “Grounded. The entire summer.”

Kade’s chest visibly caves, but Hunter remains silent.

“What else?” Juliet joins in.

“Extra chores?” her son suggests.

“Keep going,” I hear Tate say, looking at Dylan.

“We’ll volunteer at the hospital a few hours a week,” her daughter adds.

“And?” Jax folds his arms over his chest.

“And we’ll work for free at the summer camp as soon as school lets out,” Kade grumbles as the consequences get heavier and heavier.

“And?” Madoc keeps going, looking at Hunter.

But it’s Dylan who speaks up. “We’ll write letters of apology to the people whose property we damaged and to the city.”

“And?” Tate says.

“And we will earn back your trust,” Dylan adds. “We’re so sorry.”

Madoc steps up to Kade, glowering down at his son who doesn’t look sorry at all. Just pissed that he got caught.

“Are you?” he questions in a hard voice. “Are you sorry? Because if it’s not fair, I can enroll you at Weston on Monday.”

Kade looks like he bit into a lemon, but he finally nods, mumbling, “It’s fair. We’ll do it.”

“Not me,” another voice speaks up, and Madoc raises his head to look at Hunter.

I pinch my eyebrows together in confusion and shock.  
*What?*

“I’ll pay for the damages and work to replace the money out of my college fund,” his son says, “but I’m taking option A.”

“What?” Fallon moves forward.

“Hunter, no,” I hear Dylan demand, her frightened eyes on him.

Madoc’s entire body tenses, and he doesn’t say anything as he stares at his son.

Hunter wants to leave. Switch schools. He actually wants to go?

“We’ll talk about this at home,” Madoc says, turning away.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Hunter insists. “You said it was an option.”

Kade, who’d been silent, finally turns his head to look at his brother, something I can’t place going on in his eyes. “You want to leave?”

For all the arguing and the fighting, Kade doesn’t sound happy.

Hunter locks eyes with his dad, his demeanor eerily calm. “I was thinking St. Matthew’s.”

“That’s our biggest rival,” Hawke blurts out. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Hey!” Jax barks at his son’s language.

Hawke looks back down, shutting up.

“I could stay with Grandpa Monday through Friday,” Hunter tells Madoc. “It’s only an hour away from here. I’ll be home on weekends.”

But Madoc shakes his head. “You are not living . . . with him.”

“So you were bluffing?” Hunter throws back.

*Oh, boy.*

Yeah, Hunter could enroll at Weston and still live at home, but if he wanted to go to St. Matt’s, he wouldn’t be able to make that commute every day. He’d have to live with Ciaran, Fallon’s father, in Chicago.

And despite the fact that Madoc and Ciaran get along semi-well, Madoc still doesn’t want his son living with an ex-gangster.

Hunter pushes off from the table and walks up to his father, dropping his voice. “I need to get out of here,” he tells him in a near whisper. “I need something of my own. Please.”

My heart goes out to him, because I know what he’s feeling. Kade rules the school. He’s always the one everyone notices and the life of the party. He feeds off being the center of attention, and Hunter doesn’t ever seem to be able to carve out his own niche. He feels out of place and invisible.

I can’t see Madoc’s face, but I can tell he’s staring at his son, not saying anything, probably because he doesn’t want him to go, but he also doesn’t know how to fix everything that’s making Hunter unhappy.

“Fine with me.” Kade finally breaks the silence, the hint of pain in his voice that I heard earlier now gone. “Maybe now he’ll stop touching my shit.”

I close my eyes for a split second. Jesus. He’s talking about Dylan. I know he is.

She’s the wedge between them.

Hunter's eyes turn dark, and a loaded smirk I've never seen before curls his lips. He turns around, and I'm afraid he's going to hit Kade again, but he simply walks up to his brother, calm and confident.

"I'll see you on the field in the fall," he says, tossing it out like a threat.

Kade straightens, both brothers the same five foot eleven as they glare at each other. "Damn right you will."

Madoc and Fallon say nothing, but I can see their heavy breathing as if they're struggling for air.

I know Fallon and how she thinks.

She'll get the boys home. Talk to them. Everything will calm down and all of this will pass. Hunter will see reason.

Madoc, on the other hand, has a plan for every contingency, but if he's silent, then this was a twist he didn't plan for. He was bluffing about switching schools, and Hunter called him on it. He's not sure what to do, or how to fix it. Not yet.

As we leave the police station, I finally understand how hard it is to be a parent. To watch your kids make mistakes.

They won't learn until they learn, and I know Madoc is struggling. But maybe sometimes the hardest part isn't what to say and when, but rather, when to say nothing at all.

And how to know when it's that time.

I reach down and clutch the bottom of my bag, feeling the book and diary inside.

Talking isn't always the answer.

There are many other ways to teach your kids their lessons, after all.

• • •

I'm making my way through house, toward the kitchen, when I hear the clock chime midnight, and my eyes burn with



exhaustion. Today's soccer game feels like so long ago.

Passing the photos in the hallway, I see the ones from my parents' wedding—a charming, small, and candlelit ceremony in a rustic barn north of here—Jared and Tate's wedding—which seems even more special to me now that I know more about their past—Fallon and Madoc—who have no photos from their wedding but instead a great shot of her on his shoulders at the top of Mount Fuji on their honeymoon, arms spread wide and smiles on their faces with the clouds below them . . .

And Jax and Juliet, who finally gave my mother the big family wedding she'd wanted for at least one of her kids.

I hear voices coming from the kitchen, and I head there, knowing I'll find my mother.

“We spent how much in New York?” my father asks, sounding shocked. “Jesus, we didn't go to Paris! What the hell?”

I snort, seeing him leaning over my mother as she sits in her little desk along the wall, both of them studying the screen of the laptop. She's no doubt doing the family bookkeeping, and I hear my dad having the same meltdown every month.

“Don't look at me,” my mom says. “I bought one pair of shoes. You spend more money on Fifth Avenue than I do, Pretty Boy.”

“Pretty Boy?” he blurts out. And then he reaches for her, squeezing her cheeks as he leans in and kisses her.

She laughs, trying to twist away from him. “Stop it!”

I take a minute to lean my shoulder into the door frame, watching them.

And I see it. I see Jase and Kat, their playfulness and flirting, the ease and comfort they have in each other. My father and how much he loves her and my mother and how she resembles that girl in the garage, working on his car. The way

they complement each other and know when to bend. All of these things I never noticed before.

My dad releases her and starts studying the spreadsheet again. “Well, can we deduct some of this? We talked about work while we were there, right? Just claim the trip as a business expense.”

“No!” she protests and swats his hand away from the mouse. “Go away. I don’t mess with your case files. Stay away from my numbers. They’re all organized.”

He smiles and stands up straight.

“Hey,” I say when his eyes fall on me. “How’s it going?”

He sighs. “Fine. Your mother’s a good woman,” he muses, heading to the refrigerator. “She keeps me out of jail by talking me out of tax fraud.”

“Damn right,” Mom adds. “You make enough. You can pay your taxes, cheapskate.”

I watch them, smiling, and wonder what would’ve happened if my mom had never gotten help. If my dad had never gotten a divorce from Madeline or Patricia. If they’d never stopped trying to hold each other up.

I realize that now.

No one else can make you happy, and putting that expectation on the other person will doom both of you. You don’t look at someone and say “*you* can make *my* life better.” You look at them and say “*I* can make *your* life better.” Be a blessing, not a burden.

I clear my throat. “May I talk to Mom for a few minutes?”

My dad pauses mid-sip, staring at me. “Um, sure.” He nods, his eyes shooting to my mom. “You’ll tell me everything she says later, right?”

“Ha-ha,” she mocks. “She keeps my secrets. I’ll keep hers.”

“That better not be true.” He gives her a scowl, but I can see his grin as he heads out of the room. “I’ll be in my office.”

Mom types quickly on the computer, pounding the final key with some extra punch, and then turns to me, waiting.

Inhaling a deep breath, I reach in my bag and pull out the book, setting it on her desk, right in front of her.

Her eyes fall on the cover and stay there, no surprise registering on her face at all.

“You had Pasha mail me the book?”

She hesitates, but finally gives a small nod. “I knew you’d figure it out.”

Pasha lives in Toronto, setting up Jared’s production line, and my mother didn’t want me to see the book postmarked from Shelburne Falls. I guess she wanted me to read it before I started hunting down who sent it?

Occam’s razor.

Reaching back into my bag, I pull out the diary from her closet and plop it down on top of the novel. “Well, whoever wrote it had to have access to this. You, right?”

I couldn’t believe she’d trust anyone else with all those intimate details.

“Yes,” my mom admits, turning her swivel chair to face me completely. “Juliet helped me. She didn’t want to lie to you, but I asked her to hold the truth, if you came to her, until you were finished with the book. I wanted you to read it first.”

The strange look from Juliet makes sense now. She didn’t technically write it, but she did know about it.

“You could’ve told me all of this,” I chided. “Did you think I’d hate you? Or Dad?”

“No,” she rushes out, leaning over to take my hand as I sit down in the chair at the table. “When I found out I was having a daughter, Quinn, I honestly wasn’t happy. I was worried. I was so afraid I’d have another version of me, making the same

mistakes, crying over the same types of men, and making bad decision after bad decision to make someone else happy. Someone who doesn't deserve her."

I'm not sure if she's talking about Jared's dad or mine, but I keep quiet and listen, anyway.

"That's the hardest thing about being a parent," she explains. "Living through heartache, bearing your struggles, learning the hard lessons the hard way, and enduring years of climbing a wall only to fall back down and have to start all over again . . ." She holds my eyes, and her voice is weighted with sadness. "The tears, the waiting, the zero sense of who the hell you are, and then one day . . ." Her voice grows lighter and she looks happy. "You wake up, and finally you're exactly the person you've always wanted to be. Strong, decisive, resolute, kind, brave . . . But then you also look in the mirror and you're fifty-eight."

An ache hits my chest, and I can imagine a fraction of what she's talking about. All those years, all the wasted time . . . She finally grew but at a huge expense.

"And when you have a child," she goes on, "it's like watching yourself start all . . . over . . . again. You want them to make the most of every moment and be the type of person you've finally become, but that's the cruel joke of youth." She smiles sadly. "No matter what I tell you or share with you or try to teach you from everything I've learned, it won't hit home for you until you've lived it. You won't really know what I'm talking about until you've made those mistakes and learned from them on your own." She lets out a heavy sigh. "And unfortunately, that could take years."

I slide my bag off my shoulder, absently dropping it on the floor. My mom may have been happy with her life and proud of what she'd survived, but her regrets don't end with her.

She worries for me, too.

"I wasn't sure I would ever let you read it," she tells me, looking embarrassed. "Obviously, some of the scenes I wrote

would be uncomfortable for you to read.”

Uh, yeah. I’ll try not to think about the episode in my dad’s office the next time I swing by his work.

“But I wrote it when you were little, and I included your dad’s side in the story, using his thoughts from some of his old letters to me that I’ve kept over the years, because I felt his side was important, too. I’ve just been concerned about you for a long time. I finally decided that if I could show you some things in a way where you could feel them for yourself, then maybe you would learn something from him and me, and what we went through, after all. The book was a way for you to live vicariously—go through the experiences without the costs and consequences.”

“Why do you worry about me?”

She leans back in her chair, shaking her head. “Maybe your dad is right. Jared was so difficult, and it was my fault, of course, but raising you has been such an easier experience that maybe I don’t know what to do with myself.”

Her eyes flash with something, like she’s practically lost in thought, and I know she’s thinking about my brother.

“Jared was just such an open book,” she muses. “If he didn’t like something, you knew. If he wanted something, he’d take it. If he wasn’t happy, he didn’t act like he was.” And then her eyes narrow so she can study me. “What do you want, Quinn? What makes you happy?” She leans forward, taking my hand. “Whatever it is, don’t wait on anyone else to give it to you. Don’t wait for it to just happen. Go get it.”

I frown, and it’s like I’m standing on a cliff, looking down onto a waterfall and everyone else has jumped—laughing and calling to me to follow—but I’m afraid of the drop.

“It’s kind of scary,” I choke out. “What if I love you all too much, and I’m afraid of disappointing you?”

“I know you love us,” she assures. “We all know, and we love you, too. That will never change.” She leans in, trying to catch my eyes. “But does it make you feel good? Sacrificing

your own happiness to please others? Honey, if our love is that brittle, then we don't deserve you. A strong person realizes that the only love you truly need in this life is the love you have for yourself. If you have that, it's like armor. No one can stop you. No one else matters."

"So that's why you decided to let me read it," I ask, looking up.

She nods.

"But why did you write it in the first place?"

"To learn about myself. To try to make sense out of everything Jason and I went through. Everything we put Madoc and Jared through." She pauses and then continues. "We could say we were young and stupid, but that excuse only lasts so long before you realize that you were selfish and just really big assholes."

I laugh to myself, leaning back and crossing my arms over my chest. "Did you learn anything else?"

A smirk crosses her face, and she reaches behind her to dig in the desk drawer.

Pulling out a small forest green booklet, she hands it to me, and I open it up.

I see several transactions printed, and I can tell it's a bankbook. I widen my eyes, spotting the balance on the bookmarked page. "Oh, my God."

"I learned that it's okay to love and to feel vulnerable and to make mistakes," she says, "but it's not okay to live a trapped life. Never give up your control to someone else."

"Where did this money come from?"

"After I finished the book, I realized a woman should always protect herself. So I gave Jax some of the money I had saved, and the smart investor he is, he multiplied it." She laughs. "Many times."

*Oh, my God.*

I shoot my eyes back up to her. “Was this your security? In case you and my dad broke up?”

“No,” she answers. “It’s yours. I didn’t really need the savings when I married your dad, so I let Jax create an account, and it’s been collecting interest ever since.”

“It’s mine?” I can’t take this. What if she needs it some day?

“As long as you remember, Quinn . . . when you fall in love, take care of him,” she explains, “but take care of yourself, too. Make yourself happy. Spend it. Save it. Give it away. Your choice. Your life.”

## Chapter 13

I slip the bankbook into my back pocket and make my way down the hall toward my father's office.

My mom had just given me a crap load of money, and I shouldn't take it, but she said it was a gift, and I could do anything with it. Save it, donate it . . . spend it on something.

My heart has started hammering in my chest, and I'm on autopilot, but I just keep going. I'm not sure what's going to happen or what I'll say to my dad, but it's probably going to be something he doesn't like, since why else would I be so nervous?

The hardest part is jumping. I can't retreat, and I can't keep trying to please the world.

I'd hate myself. There's no choice.

Opening the cracked door wider, I step inside and see him standing at the bar against the wall, pouring himself his favorite GlenDronach to wind down before he heads to bed.

"Hey," I broach, my voice surprisingly light.

He twists his head and replaces the top on the decanter, smiling at me. "Hey. I missed you tonight. Were you at the track?"

"For a bit." I nod and walk into the room. "Dylan had her first race, so I rode with her."

His eyebrows shoot up, and I immediately laugh. He may as well find out now before it shows up in his Facebook feed.

"Madoc all but forced me, okay? I'm still in one piece."

He twists his lips to the side, scowling. "That kid, I swear . . ."

Yeah, that *kid*. I almost laugh.

My dad still sees Madoc as a cocky teenager, but I think he understands completely. We're all helpless when Madoc



decides he wants something.

Walking over to the large brown leather chairs by the bookcases, he sits down and takes a sip of whiskey. I follow and sit in the identical chair next to him, a small round table between us.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t make your game today,” he says. “I heard you ‘kicked major ass.’”

I snort, knowing those aren’t my father’s words. “Madoc lies.”

Dylan and the rest of the team carry me. I’m simply there to make sure there are eleven players on the field.

But my father corrects me, anyway. “Lawyers don’t lie. We invent truth. It’s an art.”

Yeah, I’m sure. Lucky enough for him, he has clients willing to pay such huge amounts of cash for his “art.”

I lean back in the chair, pushing my hair behind my ear and studying him for a brief moment. His gray hair has a good amount of blond left, but while there are wrinkles around his eyes and the lines on his forehead have grown deeper over time, his blue eyes still pierce like lightning in a storm, and his hands are still so strong. I can remember the feel of my little fingers in his when he’d help me cross streets in the big city as a kid.

After all he and my mother went through and put each other through, I understand how he has so much hope for me. I was a long time in the making.

“You really love Mom, don’t you?” I say, holding his eyes.

“Of course,” he answers and then looks down, looking lost in thought as he takes another sip. “I can’t live without her. I never could.”

“What made you finally realize it?”

“When I realized that she was fine without me,” he admits. “I’d always loved her, but when she got sober, and she was

working and paying her bills . . . doing everything just fine on her own, I realized I had lost her, and the finality of it hit home.”

I narrow my eyes on him, still not sure I understand. He wanted her, because he no longer had control of her?

He seems to see my confusion, because he continues explaining.

“I was so arrogant back in those days, honey. I took everything for granted.” He swirls the liquid in his glass, staring at it, probably because it’s easier than looking me in the eye. “But seeing her turning her life around—happy—honestly, it hurt. It hurt my pride. It hurt my confidence. It hurt my equilibrium. It hurt everywhere.”

“Didn’t you want her to be healthy?”

He finally looks up at me, his tone turning soothing. “Of course I did. But I guess I thought, though, that if she didn’t need me, why would she want me? And all over again, I was in knots. Now that she had choices, would she still choose me?”

And all of a sudden I understand.

My dad had had absolutely no idea what he brought to the table outside of his money and power. He spent so much time and energy taking care of things, providing for her, throwing cash at their problems, that the nature of their relationship had been blurred. He thought my mom loved him, because she was young and naïve. Because fear kept her bound to him.

Once she was older, wiser, and stronger, what did he have to offer her except himself? And would she even want that?

“I’d lost her too many times, and now it was going to be for good,” he continues. “I couldn’t let her go. I finally woke up.”

For a long time, my father did what was best for him. Even though he loved her.

But after sixteen years, my mother finally realized that no one was going to save her but her, so she let him go. If he came after her, he came after her. If he didn't, life would go on.

I'm not sure if my mother's plan worked by giving me the book, though. I'll make mistakes, and I'll want things that are bad for me. That goes without saying. It's human nature to be imperfect, after all.

But I have learned one thing tonight. Life moves fast, and the next forty years will be here before I know it. I don't want to wake up at fifty-eight with regret.

I take in a deep breath, exhaling a sigh. "Dad, I suck at soccer," I say, raising my eyes to look at him. "I hate piano, and I don't want to be a lawyer or a doctor. I don't want everything you want for me."

His eyes narrow on me, and he tenses. "Quinn, if this is about Notre Dame—"

"I want to go to Notre Dame," I cut him off. "I think it's exactly where I belong."

I see him relax a little. "Good."

"And I agree, taking a couple of courses here in town this summer is a good idea. Maybe I can finish my degree early."

He nods, still looking nervous like he's waiting for bad news to drop. "I'm . . . glad you think so. But why do I get the feeling that you're about to tell me you met a boy and you're pregnant?"

I chew on the corner of my mouth. Here goes nothing.

"You know the property you own on High Street?" I ask. "The old bakery on the corner of Sutton?"

"Yeah," he replies hesitantly. "I bought it years ago. It was a prime location, so I snatched it up. Why?"

I hold my breath, spitting out the words before I have a chance to second-guess myself. "I want you to sell it to me."

He rears back, looking at me like I spoke another language.

“Just let me say something,” I blurt out, holding up my hand. “I’ve been busy in one way or another my entire life, and I understand that what you wanted for me you wanted out of love. And because I didn’t know what else I wanted to do, I went along with everything. The tutors, the extra courses, dance classes, gymnastics, swimming, summer volunteer projects in the rainforest . . .” I list each item on my outstretched fingers. “I did it, because it was better than staying still. Or so I thought. But if I had stopped, I would’ve had time to think.” I lower my voice, trying to get my point across. “I never dream, Dad. I never look forward to anything, because none of it’s a passion. Sell me the store. Give me a new summer project and see what I can do.”

“You want to start a business?” he asks. “At seventeen?”

“A summer business,” I clarify. “For now. And I’m almost eighteen. I promise I won’t get distracted. I realize college is important, and I’m going. But I really want this.”

“It’s not a dollhouse, Quinn.” He laughs, sounding flustered. “It’s a building with property taxes and health and safety inspections and plumbing problems—”

“And I can do it. I know how to research, plan, and be a problem solver. I can do this. It won’t be your problem.”

He shakes his head, closing his eyes. “Quinn . . .”

“Dad, please,” I implore. “I’m excited. I can’t wait to get started.” And then I lean in, joking with him. “I mean there are worse ways I could spend my time, right? If I’m buried under this project all summer, I won’t be dating, will I?”

He rolls his eyes and sets his drink down, next to the crystal bowl of gourmet jelly beans.

“How do plan to pay for this?” he questions. “You’ll need supplies, renovations, inventory, utilities, and even if you did get a loan to buy the property, I’m not comfortable with you having that kind of weight on your shoulders—”

“I don’t need a loan.” I pull out the bankbook and toss it on the table.

He stares at it before picking it up and opening it. Quickly scanning the inside, his eyebrows finally shoot up. Probably when he saw the balance.

His eyes dart over to me, all humor gone. “This isn’t your college account. Where did this money come from?”

I give a half-smile and stand up, grabbing a jelly bean and popping it into my mouth.

“I think you need to go talk to Mom.”

And then I turn and walk out the door.

• • •

“That’s not the ten millimeter!” I hear Jared yelling when I walk into his shop.

“You told me to get the eight millimeter!”

“The eight won’t fit.”

“Didn’t I tell you that?” Madoc bellows back, and I hear tools clank as I come through the large room.

Jared, Madoc, and Jax are all crowded around a Chevy SS, the hood popped open, no tires, and a missing windshield. Madoc is still dressed in his suit; however, the jacket and tie are gone and his shirttails are hanging out.

“It’s okay,” Jax tells him, coming up behind him and squeezing his shoulders, trying to calm him down. “Relax.”

Madoc shakes his head, pain written all over his face. “My kid doesn’t want to live in my house anymore.”

“It’s a lot more complicated than that,” Jared says. “Give him time.”

I guess they all came here to blow off some steam after the scene at the station. Under the hood of a car is the one place they find their center.

“Hey,” I say gently, making myself known. I’d planned on Jared being here, but I was glad I’d found all three of them.

“How did you get here?” Jax asks, knowing I don’t have a car.

I won’t tell him I rode my bike at midnight.

Ignoring him, I reach into my satchel and pull out the Internet printouts I gathered at home and hand them to Jared.

“What’s this?” He takes the papers and starts skimming them.

“It’s a list of event coordinators. Your expo in Chicago is way too much of a time commitment, and one of them will do a much better job than I will.”

He narrows his eyes, finally looking up at me.

“I love you guys,” I tell them, “but I have other plans for the summer. I’ll be around, but I won’t always be available. And honestly, the expo is stressful. I’m sorry.”

Jared gives a half-smile. “Of course it’s stressful. That’s why I push it off on you or Pasha,” he tells me. “But it’s fine. I just like having you around. I’ll make do.”

He leaves a quick peck on my forehead and folds the papers, sticking them in his back pocket.

Thank God. I guess I should’ve known Jared would be understanding. He’s a firm believer in people doing exactly what they want to do.

I turn to Madoc. “And I will volunteer ten hours a week this summer, but I’m not interning, and I’m not on a schedule, okay?”

He shrugs, looking like his mind is on a million other things. “Okay.”

I glance at Jax. “And Hawke can coordinate the fireworks show,” I tell him. “He needs some responsibilities.”

Jax runs his hand through his hair, looking tired but in complete agreement. Hawke is allowed to roam at his own free will. A little routine wouldn't hurt him, and Jax knows that.

“Are you okay?” Madoc asks.

“Yeah.” I nod. “How long are you guys going to be here?”

Madoc sighs, tossing down his wrench. “I'm on my way out. Fallon just texted and Hunter's not home yet, so . . .”

“I'll be here until this is done,” Jared answers, gesturing to the car. “Maybe an hour, but now that Madoc is leaving, it should go faster.”

“Blow me,” Madoc mumbles and walks over to the toolbox and grabs his jacket lying on top.

I jerk my thumb behind me, toward the door. “I'm going to head down the street . . . check something out,” I tell Jared.

“I'll be back soon. Can you give me a ride home?”

Yeah,” he says.

I wait until I'm outside to dig out my new keys.

## Chapter 14

It's mine.

I smile wide, unable to contain it.

Walking as quickly as I can, I carry the little lamp from my bike in one hand, and the keys my father gave me dangle from the other as I take a right on Sutton, scurrying across the narrow brick lane and into the alley behind the old bakery. While the main streets are well lit, I rush as quickly as possible, because back here, there's nothing and no one. Not even a street light.

My hand shakes as I try to work the key into the lock. My blood is racing, and I inhale a couple of deep breaths to try to calm down. Twisting the knob, I finally swing open the door and immediately paw the wall inside, searching for a light switch.

*I'm opening a shop.* By next summer, I'll have it ready.

I flip the switch but nothing happens. Well, I guess that makes sense. This place has been shut down for years. I turn on the flashlight and close the door behind me, aiming the light into the room that I can tell already is the kitchen. Three long wooden tables sit parallel to each other while stoves, sinks, a refrigerator, and a cooler door line the walls, along with old aluminum racks holding empty trays.

I walk in further, trying to take everything in, already inventorying in my head the appliances that would need to be inspected, possibly replaced, and all the cleaning that would probably take a whole month in itself. Lifting the toe of my shoe, I lightly shove an empty flour bag out of my way as I push through the revolving door separating the kitchen from the front of the store.

“What are you doing?”

I jump and suck in a breath, spinning around. “What the—” I gasp, flashing my light on Hunter, who stands in the open



doorway. “What the hell are you doing?”

He shrugs and steps inside, closing the door behind him. “I was driving around, and I saw you sneaking in the back.”

My heart pounds so hard it hurts. I shake my head at him, starting to calm down.

“Madoc’s looking for you.” I turn and push through the door again. “Where’ve you been?”

He follows me through, into the front of the shop, but doesn’t answer. If his father’s looking for him, and Kade is home, then Hunter took the truck without permission. I’m sure he figures there’s not much more trouble he can get into after what happened tonight, though.

We walk through, and I flip more switches, checking for power, while Hunter kicks garbage and newspapers with his feet.

There are cobwebs in the corners of the ceiling as well as under the counter, and I can still smell the scent of warm sugar, probably from the remnants of old sprinkles and icing inside the display cases. It will be a wonder if I don’t have roaches to deal with, too.

The wallpaper has to go, but I catch sight of the floors, and as I brush away some paper and dust under my foot, I notice that the tile is a Moroccan mosaic pattern. Lots of color and so different from anything else around Shelburne Falls, that’s for sure.

That can stay.

I see Hunter finally lean back, sticking his hands in his pocket and resting on a wrought iron table.

“I’m going to buy this place,” I tell him. “I’m going to turn it into a pastry shop.”

He just stares at me, nodding, and I narrow my eyes on him.

“You don’t have anything to say?” I challenge. “No smart-ass remark?”

“You’re confusing me with Kade,” he retorts. “I think the world has enough shit talkers.”

I smile, turning my head away so he can’t see. He looks and sounds like he’s pissed, but I couldn’t appreciate the remark more. He’s absolutely correct. Enough talking and bullshit, and I’m thankful for his silence. I don’t need anyone else’s judgments, concerns, or negative feedback.

And when Jared, Madoc, and Jax have something to say tomorrow when they find out, I’ll tell them the same thing. Mind your own business.

Hunter leans down, picking up a chair that was overturned. “You need to make sure you have those blackberry swirl Brownies,” he says, leaning back down to collect trash and toss it into the bin in the corner. “They’re Dylan’s favorite. And the sugar cookie apple cobbler and those Samoa donuts you made with the Girl Scout cookies that time . . .” He trails off, letting out a sigh that sounds suddenly hungry. “I swear, you’ll have people lined up out the door.”

I watch him as he starts tearing flyers off the wall and throwing them away. I love that he isn’t hassling me.

Walking over to his side, I help tear the papers through their staples. “Were you saying good-bye to her?” I ask quietly, not looking at him. “Is that where you were at?”

He’s silent, but he doesn’t ask who we’re talking about. We both know.

“I’m just going to Grandpa’s,” he tells me. “I’ll get a summer job and earn some money before the school year at St. Matt’s starts. I’ll be home on weekends.”

“No you won’t.” I glance over at him. “You’ll make friends. Find reasons to stay in Chicago. We’ll see you less and less.”

I remember saying the same thing to Lucas nearly four years ago when he said he would be back. He was lying, and I knew it then.

But Hunter stares up at the wall, now bare, looking like he's thinking about more than he's saying. "I'll be back," he assures. And then I catch a small smile curling his lips. "There's Rivalry Week, after all."

Yeah. Rivalry Week.

I shake my head. That'll be fun.

## Epilogue

The sun begins to dip below the horizon, casting an orange glow over the city, and I stare west, barely feeling the day's warmth soak through my suit jacket.

I hate this time of day. No meetings, no deadlines, no conference calls or site inspections . . . nowhere to rush off to. There's too much quiet, and I don't like quiet.

Looking out over the rooftops of the city, I tip my beer up and take a drink as I let the view soak in. The awe-inspiring designs of the skyscrapers, the day's light reflecting off all the glass and setting the city aglow, the Persian Gulf looming behind me, the domes of the ancient mosques, and the smell of the spices and wares drifting up from the souks . . .

Dubai has been a place for me to sink myself into these past three years. It's been an inspiration, giving me the drive and knowledge to push further and further into new territory of design. There's been so much for me to learn and live up to, and I've been grateful for the noise and distraction. How could I ever go home after living in a place like this?

I set my beer down on the ledge of the balcony and reach into my breast pocket and pull out the compass Quinn gave to me before I left Shelburne Falls four years ago.

I look down at the antique brass heirloom, smiling at the thought of her. She was so innocent and curious, so angry and sad to see me go.

Making her mad at me wasn't something I enjoyed—especially when I couldn't explain to her why I needed to leave—but I had to admit, she was the only one who made me second-guess leaving. The only one who made me feel like I *needed* to stay. It had kind of felt good to know I'd be missed.

I can't help wondering what she'd be like now. She'd be almost eighteen. Nearly an adult.

And here I am, nearly thirty, and still alone, burying myself in my work.

I haven't changed at all.

Flipping open the top of the compass, I watch the disk under the glass wobble on its axis and the dial slowly find its position just slightly past the *W*. Turning my body a hair to the right, I pause and wait, watching as the needle moves again, coming to rest at the exact point between north and west.

And then I look up, fixing my eyes dead ahead, out to the horizon.

"Mr. Morrow?"

I blink and snap the compass shut. Sliding it back inside my breast pocket, I pick up my beer again and turn my head to see Tahra, the housekeeper, standing in the doorway between the balcony and the apartment. An immigrant from India, she comes several times a week to clean up, grocery shop, and cook supper, earning a little extra money in addition to what her husband brings home from the oil rigs.

"Yes, Tahra?"

She smiles, speaking softly. "Your dinner is staying warm in the oven, sir. I'll head home now."

"Thank you," I tell her. "Good night."

I turn back, catching the sun just as it disappears beneath the horizon. The dry air burns my nostrils as I breathe in, but I'm not ready to go inside yet.

"Are you all right?" I hear her ask tentatively.

I twist my head around again, regarding her. "Yes, why?"

She studies me for a moment and then gestures to me with the dish towel in her hand. "You've started standing in the same spot every night, facing the same direction."

I hesitate before responding. "Have I?"

I haven't been keeping track, but I guess she's right. I thought I'd been more restless lately, but if she was starting to notice, then I guess it is pretty obvious.

"If you wish to pray, Mecca is that way."

And I look back up in time to see her gesture to the southwest with a knowing smile.

I grin, shaking my head. "You don't stop trying, do you?" And then I look back out on the last light of the sun shimmering on the city, and I think about what's beyond the skyscrapers and the bazaars and the desert. Beyond Mecca, the Red Sea, Africa, and the Atlantic . . .

"Actually, my home is that way," I finally say, pointing with my bottle and gesturing northwest. "My home is 7,308 miles from this spot."

"That's a long way."

I nod, lost in thought. "Yeah." I pause and then continue, "And even still, nothing is different. She was right."

"Who?"

*Happiness is a direction, not a place.* Yeah, she was certainly right. The corner of my mouth lifts in a smile, thinking about how smart that kid always was.

Even a young girl, fourteen years old, knew that anger and unhappiness had not one fucking thing to do with where you lived, whom you loved, or what you did with your life. It was all in our heads.

And no matter how much you run, you can't run from yourself, can you?

Amusement fills my chest, and I'm suddenly wondering what she's doing now. What they're all doing. Madoc and his barbecues and picnics and pool parties, making everyone laugh and love him despite themselves. Jared with the sound of his engine filling the neighborhood and Tate and how she always wanted to play in the rain, even as an adult. Fallon and her smart mouth, who always got everyone we worked with to

do things exactly her way; and Juliet with her sexy, free spirit. And then there's Jax, with one eye always on the ball and one eye always on his wife.

I wonder about the kids and how they're all grown up and probably wreaking hell, getting their licenses and breaking rules.

Quinn annoyed the crap out of me when she was little, but she always stood by my side, literally, making me feel like one of their own in a group of people that weren't really my family.

Why did I leave home again? I suddenly struggle to remember my reasons, because right now, it feels like what I gave up is a hell of a lot more than what I ran away from.

"Sir?"

My eyelids flutter, and I take in a breath, coming back to the conversation. "Sorry. Nothing. Never mind," I say quickly, dismissing her. "Thank you, Tahra."

"Good night, sir."

But before I have a chance to turn back around, she speaks up again, "If you don't mind my asking . . . if you're homesick, why don't you just go home?"

I drop my eyes, remaining silent. I'm not sure how to answer that, but it's a good question.

*Can I go home?* Of course. Anytime I want.

So why wasn't I budging?

I inhale a long breath, feeling the welcome heat suddenly hit my cold fingers as I stare northwest.

"Someday," I whisper.

**Penelope Douglas** is the author of the Fall Away series, including *Aflame*, *Until You*, *Rival*, *Bully*, and *Falling Away*. Born in Dubuque, Iowa, she earned a Bachelor's degree in Public Administration, then a Master of Science in Education at Loyola University in New Orleans. She and her husband have one daughter.





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