



# ONE WILD WISH

KELLY SISKIND



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ISBN 978-1-988937-25-0 (digital edition)

ISBN 978-1-988937-22-9 (hardcover edition)

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# **ONE WILD WISH SERIES**

Special Edition  
Omnibus



**KELLY SISKIND**

## **Praise for Kelly Siskind's**

### **One Wild Wish series:**

“Addictive and refreshing.” ~ *New York Times* bestselling author Rebecca Yarros on *He's Going Down*

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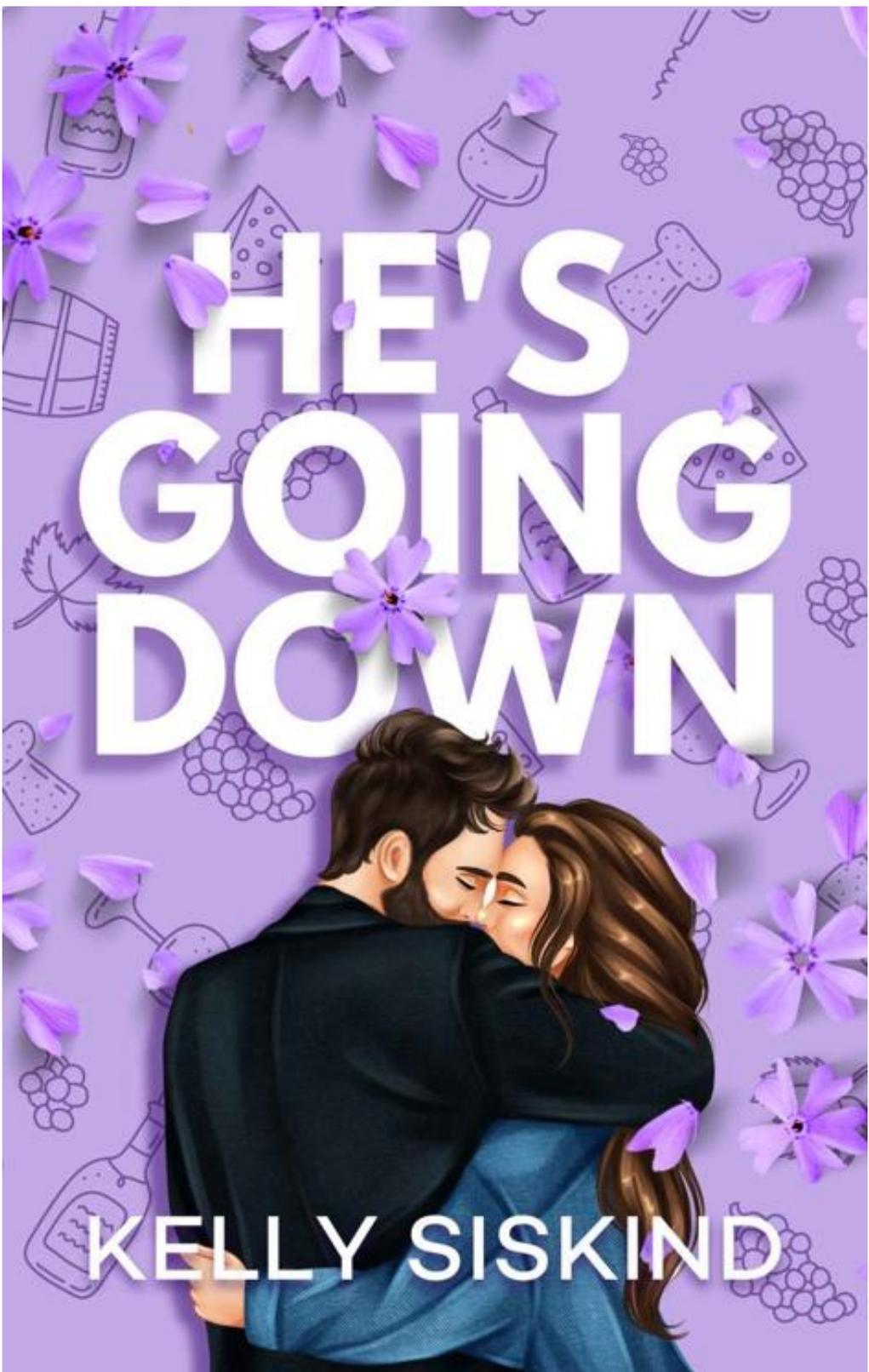
“It was impossible not to lose my heart (and occasionally my breath) from this sexy, smart, wholly consuming story.” ~ Bookgasms Book Blog on *He's Going Down*

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The background is a solid purple color. It is decorated with various white line-art illustrations of food and drink items, including a wine glass, a slice of pizza, a bunch of grapes, a bottle, and a fork. Scattered throughout are several purple flowers and individual petals. In the lower center, there is a digital illustration of a man and a woman in a romantic embrace, nearly kissing. The man has dark hair and is wearing a dark suit jacket. The woman has long brown hair and is wearing a blue top. The overall aesthetic is romantic and elegant.

# HE'S GOING DOWN

KELLY SISKIND

# CHAPTER ONE

---



RACHEL

Drinking wine was my form of Russian roulette. My first glass usually led to smiles and silly ramblings as I joked with friends. Glass two had the potential to set off laughing fits, the kind that produced tears and sore abs as onlookers gawked. Glass three could lead to dancing in public. *Not* a pretty sight. But glass four was the real risk.

Glass four often transformed me into Reckless Rachel.

Tonight I was on glass three, but my usual giddiness was absent. Ainsley, Gwen, and I sat perched around our high-top table, music swelling through the club. Vesper's usual business-casual crowd mingled in clusters, all lit by large hanging globes. The type of light that turned a two into a ten after a few drinks.

"I need those shoes." Ainsley zeroed in on a brunette's mile-high pink heels. The stilettos wouldn't mesh with my wash-and-wear wardrobe, but Ainsley's closet could double as a Fashion Week boutique, complete with indexed shoe collection. The tagline on her Personal Shopper card read *Style Whisperer*.

"If you tackle her," I said, trying to get into our people watching, "you're on your own."

Ainsley sighed longingly, her blue eyes locked on the coveted heels. "Some friend you are."

“I can take her down for you.” Gwen flexed her defined biceps. My non-existent muscles had major arm envy. “But you’ll owe me, and I take payment in jeans.”

Gwen’s CrossFit ninja moves could get the job done, but the stilettoed woman nuzzled into a man’s side. He was blond. Handsome. And too built for Gwen to tackle.

Cute men abounded tonight, but the few who caught my eye were already chatting women up—men in button-down shirts with sleeves rolled to their elbows, dress pants tailored to slim hips, hair trimmed short enough to accentuate a strong jaw. The type who’d sail on the weekends and probably loved to play golf and drink good wine, and who had successful careers.

Unlike yours truly.

“Enough with that face, Rachel.” Gwen licked the salt from her margarita rim and took a sip.

I loosened my jaw. “What’s wrong with my face?”

“It’s depressing.” Ainsley’s husky voice battled with the hipster R&B tunes. “This is our night, and that sad puppy-dog look is far from festive. You’re not allowed to be sad on April twelfth.”

She was right, of course. April twelfth meant wine and loud music and jokes with Ainsley and Gwen. If I’d ditched them as contemplated, they would have kidnapped me, rolled me in honey and feathers, and left me in the San Francisco Zoo with a sign reading *Yellow-bellied Traitor*. The least I could do was force a smile.

“We should buy her another drink,” Gwen said. Ainsley nodded vigorously.

Both my friends bobbed to the music, but all I could muster was a foot twitch. “Four drinks are dangerous for me.”

“Dangerously *awesome*.” Gwen had a doctorate in peer pressure.

Last time she coaxed me into a fourth glass of wine, Reckless Rachel was unleashed. The video of me shouting “I

have a penis” while waving a dildo *in public* would haunt me forever. But she could be onto something. Tonight was my birthday. *Our* birthdays. Not only were we celebrating another trip around the sun, but it was the sixth anniversary of the night we all met.

That memorable evening, I’d been dancing—nowhere near the dance floor—eyes closed, my arms doing some sort of Vogue-on-acid thing. Someone had toasted me, hollering, “Happy birthday!” at the top of his lungs, then Gwen was in my face with a smile that screamed trouble, shouting, “It’s my birthday, too!” Before we knew it, Ainsley was hugging us both, her “Mine, too!” slurred for all to hear. We woke up, officially twenty-one, all three of us in Gwen’s apartment with mussed hair, foul breath, booze leaching from our pores, permanent friendships forged over a greasy breakfast.

I needed to revisit that happy.

The funky bass thumped in my chest. “I’ll take that drink, but I still have half a glass to finish.” Since my giggly self had yet to appear, I prayed Reckless Rachel was on hiatus, too.

Ainsley finished her appletini. “You have to catch up with us anyway. I’ll get the next round, and maybe find someone to buy it for me.”

Considering she had more curves than Kate Upton, that shouldn’t be a challenge.

Ainsley hopped off her stool and nodded at my drink. “Another Pinot Grigio?”

I swirled my glass. “No. Pinot Noir. Only if it’s from Sonoma. If not, I’ll go with Cabernet Sauvignon, but nothing from Argentina. Preferably from Western Australia. Margaret River, maybe? But whatever.”

“But whatever?” She batted her thick eyelashes. “I’ll buy you something red.”

If I were at home, I’d choose a bottle from my wine fridge, not a loser in the bunch. Wine reviews were read and compared and entered into my spreadsheet before I gave up

valuable real estate for a new bottle, all mine, all beautiful, all wondering which would get to breathe next.

Instead I'd be drinking something *red*.

She pushed up her boobs, her white minidress displaying ample cleavage, and sashayed toward the bar.

Gwen scooted closer. "Since I haven't heard about any blind dates involving men with more hair in their ears than on their heads, I'm guessing your dating pool dried up?"

"For now," I said. "Next time a family member sets me up, I'm planning to remove my contacts. Better to bang into walls than be faced with unruly ear hair."

Gwen massaged her shoulder, likely sore from some insane workout. "I'm taking a dating sabbatical myself."

"To focus on work?"

"Because I'm an asshole magnet."

After talk of ear hairs, my mind conjured furry assholes bumping down the street pursuing Gwen. I stifled my laugh. "Wouldn't it be easier if we dug chicks?"

"Tell me about it." She tilted her head, scrunching her nose in concentration. The look she assumed when dissecting my crappy dates and job woes. Gwen the problem solver. "But I don't know. I could totally make out with you and maybe get in on some boob action, but all the business downtown"—she motioned to my crossed legs—"freaks me out."

I cackled, an unattractive sound that had me second guessing another drink. "I'm bad enough with men. If a woman were between my legs, I'd freeze up."

"Define bad enough."

Water circled the base of my glass. I dipped my finger in it and spelled the word *frigid*. "I just get so in my head, stressing about...I don't know what. I can't come from oral."

Her mouth dropped open. "Like ever?"

I mentally catalogued my oral history: Daniel Bend's tongue spelling out the alphabet *nowhere near my clit*. Allen

Goldstein motorboating his stubbled face so roughly I got a rash. My last boyfriend, Maxwell Bush-Wetter (his name was a total sham), who mistook my lady parts for an ice cream cone. “From sex, yes. Just not, you know.”

“*You know?* Is that your code for eating pussy?”

I ducked, and she shook her head.

“You need to get over yourself. The first step to owning your sexuality is by using words like pussy. Your mother can’t hear you. Her head will not explode.”

As if on cue, my cell phone rang. Without looking at it, I knew it was *her*. Even my mother’s ring had a tone. Urgent. Unrelenting. *Shrill*. Unable to handle a longwinded conversation about a distant relative diagnosed with The Cancer or The Gout, I dug through my purse to silence it, barely able to find the thing among her throng of paranoid gifts.

Bear bell: One never knew when a grizzly would charge down Market Street.

Swiss Army Knife: The need to drink wine or, say, *skin a deer*, easily solved.

Cortisone cream: Her cure-all.

I found my phone and hit mute. It wasn’t like we hadn’t spoken twice that morning, and she’d no doubt bring up my crappy job again, something I needed to suppress for a few hours. I sipped my wine, glad the call had at least cut Gwen and my conversation short.

Unfortunately, the next thing Gwen said was, “How did I not know about your oral issue?”

She was nothing if not persistent. Although us girls gossiped endlessly, the nitty gritty of my sex life wasn’t usually up for discussion. “It never came up?”

“Our definition of friendship differs, and we need to fix this handicap of yours.”

An unlikely fix. But my gaze slid back to that blond man and the woman pressed against him, to her hand resting on his

very fine backside. It had been too long since I'd seen a man naked. Too long since my hands had roamed freely over a man's physique. I'd given up on the elusive oral "O," but I was all in for the rest—the slide of skin against skin, the belly swoop at the first kiss. Hopefully the next guy who took me out would be cute and fun enough to get us to second base.

*That* thought had me grinning.

The music pumped louder, a decibel higher than deafening, like someone hit the wrong switch. Ainsley returned with our drinks and placed my glass of *red* next to my half-full glass of Pinot Grigio. Guess I'd be double-fisting it.

"What are you two smiling about?" Ainsley may have shouted, but we still squinted, as though that would allow us to hear her better.

Unsure what was wrong with the sound system, I yelled back, "Getting head!"

Reckless Rachel territory.

She leaned closer and shouted, "Sorry, what?"

I inhaled deeply and, remembering Gwen's sexuality comment, I screamed as loudly as possible, "Eating pussy!"

But the music had shut off. Abruptly. At once.

All nearby heads cranked my way.

Gwen tipped over, grabbing her belly as she nearly laughed out a lung. Ainsley followed suit. My cheeks and neck flamed, my freckles likely glowing.

The music returned just as quickly, most people picking their conversations back up, all except one man who did *not* belong in this swanky club filled with hair gel and primed women. With his threadbare jeans and a buckle that could double as a boxing championship belt, he'd have been more at home in a backcountry bar. Add his boots, that looked like they'd marched to China and back, the shaggy black hair, five-day scruff, and the ink peeking out of his cuffed sleeves, and he was maybe more biker than backcountry.

The girls were chatting again, and I tried to listen, catching the odd word from Gwen about her job at the adoption agency or Ainsley gushing about some new purse, but my attention kept drifting back to that man. That dude. That *bad boy*.

His gaze didn't shift from mine. Not cocky, exactly, but confident. One elbow on the bar, he leaned on it as though he owned the place. My attention shouldn't have been snagged on him, but he was gorgeous, smoldering the way he was, intensity in the sharp lines of his face.

"That guy is staring at you like you're dinner."

I swung my attention back to Ainsley. "Because Gwen told me to own my sexuality, and everyone and their mother heard me scream *eating pussy*." Words I apparently couldn't keep contained.

"I wish we had that on video," Gwen said. "I'd play it at your wedding. And anniversaries. And funeral."

I flicked her arm. "Glad to know who my friends are."

She rubbed her bicep. "Whatever. You'd do the same."

"Probably."

"Seriously," Ainsley said, still focused on Bad Boy. "That guy hasn't even blinked, and he's crazy hot. He has that whole lone wolf thing going on."

Gwen propped her chin on her hand. "He could be on *Sons of Anarchy*. I bet he knows how to *ride*. A Harley," she added with a wink.

Jesus. Like I needed to add that visual to all the rough and tumble he had going on. But I did. With relish. It had been ten long months since I'd had sex, and any sex I'd experienced had always been nice. *Fine*. The word that encapsulated my life. I'd never experienced the type of sex I read about in romance novels, with the arched back and lust-filled moans and dirty words whispered against sweaty skin. I'd bet my Chateau Montelena Chardonnay that Bad Boy knew how to make a good girl like me fall to her knees and fall apart around him.

I sipped my Pinot Grigio. Gulped may have been more like it, my buzz *buzz-buzz-buzz* through my veins.

That's when Bad Boy kicked off the bar, all that grit and swagger aimed right for me.

"Oh my God." This from Ainsley.

"Holy shit." Gwen's acute observation.

*What the hell?* Embarrassment still burned my neck, but something hotter burned lower.

Bad Boy neared our table, his cheekbones and strong nose a study in male magnetism. A beer bottle swung from his hand, a few rings on his fingers glinting, the thick leather cuff around his wrist impossibly manly. His eyes were zeroed in on me. Because I'd screamed *pussy* in a crowded room.

The girls gawked as he stopped at my side. He placed a presumptuous hand on my back, on the area left bare by my top's dipping fabric. "I'd like to buy you a drink."

There was no question in his tone. No "can I?" or "would you mind?" Not that I could focus on much with his hand gliding over my skin, the tips of his fingers curling around the back of my ribs. This man definitely knew how to *ride*.

And I promptly said, "No."

"Pretty sure your eyes said yes. They practically called me over here."

Hello, overconfident. "You should pay attention to my mouth, then."

"That I am."

*Excuse me?* Never had a man been so forward, so unapologetic in his advances. My fingers floated to my neck, my skin burning hot. "The answer is still no."

He didn't remove his hand, just studied me, his lips so full and tempting. So close to mine. A chain dipped below the top button of his shirt, the worn material shifting over what looked like a hard body. I gulped more wine, the dregs of glass three disappearing fast.

Gwen kicked my ankle. “What she meant to say was ‘My place or yours?’”

“I said what I meant.” I returned her kick and tried not to stare at the dark curls tumbling over Bad Boy’s forehead, the glistening of his plump bottom lip as he swiped his tongue over it. I was in skinny jeans, my halter top conservative except for the dip at the back, but under his scrutiny I felt naked—and it felt dangerously good.

He removed his hand from my back, nonchalance in the tilt of his head. “That’s a shame.”

With that, he turned, disappearing into the crowd, taking my rush of heat with him. I attempted to dampen the quickening of my heart, my back and ribs still tingling from his touch.

Gwen glowered at me. “What is wrong with you?”

“With *me*?”

“That”—she gestured in the direction Bad Boy had disappeared—“was bound to be a Hall of Fame Fuck, and you turned him down.”

Ainsley followed with a dreamy sigh. “I’d let him tie me up with that belt of his.”

“Come on,” I said. “You both know I’m not cut out for one-night stands. Forget the fact that I’m too much of a prude to enjoy that type of thing, the only reason he came over was because I shouted *eating pussy*. He’s probably a freak.”

“A wild and kinky freak.” Gwen craned her neck, searching for him. “Too bad I’m on an asshole break.”

Gwen’s strapless top flaunted her physique, kept toned through CrossFit, free-climbing, and surfing—anything to feel an adrenaline rush. Dangerous men also spiked her heartrate, the type who made false promises only to ditch a girl when it mattered. I knew the sort all too well.

Gabe had left his mark on me.

“What’s done is done,” I said, swirling my wineglass. “We’re out to celebrate our birthdays, and it’s almost

midnight. We should make a wish. A big one this year. Something important. Something life changing.”

Something to shove my train onto a different track.

We shared glances. Ainsley twirled a lock of her golden hair around her finger, Gwen tapped her thumb, and I spun my wineglass in endless circles. My biggest stress in life since college, and every wasted diploma following, had been work. My job. My lack of purpose. Each day, before I left my apartment, I’d read the quote framed in my hall:

*“Aim for the moon. If you miss, you may hit a star.” ~ W. Clement Stone*

Problem was, I didn’t know the shape of my moon. It certainly didn’t look like my current loan officer gig, complete with cold calls and angry hang-ups. It didn’t look like the life coaching job I *maybe* lost for telling a guy his toupée was on the endangered species list. My stint as a Reiki therapist had been short-lived, too. It lasted until one client suggested I do Reiki on his cock.

Instead of aiming for the moon, I’d been bouncing around the solar system, and I’d hit nothing but refuse.

That made my wish easy. A grand ambition to find a rewarding job and start over, *again*, but this time I’d do it right. I’d suffer through my current boss’s thinly veiled sexual harassment as he searched for the meaning of life in the valley between my breasts. Once I found something exciting, then, and only then, would I hand in my pink slip. Year twenty-seven would be my Oscar bid. My Super Bowl win. I’d even settle for a Teen Choice Award for Best Lip Wax.

I shoved my watch in the girls’ faces. “You have one minute until midnight. I’ve got my wish, but no sharing or it won’t come true. Ready?”

Ainsley sat taller, fortitude in the press of her lips. “This will be our year. And I agree about making it a big one. Like a resolution-type wish. Something we can work toward.”

Gwen picked at her nails. “We could even bet. Make each other do something horrible if we fail.”

“I’m not doing some psycho CrossFit marathon, like dragging a tire behind me while scaling a building.” Ainsley looked horrified.

Gwen snickered. “You’re right. Betting *is* kinda dumb. I’ll settle on a pinky swear.”

Gwen’s pinky swear was akin to a blood oath. Guess I wasn’t the only one with a desperate wish on the line. “You mean business.”

Her eyes clouded briefly. “I do. Which means we can’t bail on our resolutions. We need to accomplish them by next year. We should even write them down, read them together at our twenty-eighth birthday.”

We agreed, and Gwen fished a notepad and pen from her purse. She passed us each a torn-out sheet. When my turn came, I wrote my resolution in all caps, no mistaking my intended goal: *I WILL FIND A REWARDING JOB*. Giddy, I folded my paper and handed it to Gwen, who stored our aspirations in a zippered purse pocket.

Wearing matching looks of determination, we all linked our pinky fingers.

“On the count of three,” Ainsley said, “we make our wish.”

“No sharing,” I reminded them. “And no peeking at what we wrote,” I told Gwen.

We traded excited glances as Ainsley counted us down, landing on her final *three* with a flourish. I made my wish, the prospect of quitting and finding a fulfilling career spurring my heart nearly as fast as it had thrummed at Bad Boy’s touch. *Nearly*.

Then we were plunged into darkness.

The lights went out. As did the music, *again*. Shouts and gasps sounded for two frantic seconds. Our pinkies clenched harder, anchoring us to one another in the darkness. Just as quickly, everything sparked back to life.

The lively crowd became more boisterous, but we'd fallen silent. The air seemed to vibrate. My shoulders shivered, the hairs on the back of my neck at attention. Nervous energy was mirrored on my friends' faces.

"Jesus." Ainsley shattered the tension. "That was horror-movie creepy, but it was worth the price of admission."

Gwen released our fingers and studied her hands. "They must be having some serious technical difficulties tonight."

"Right. Technical difficulties." But my erratic pulse didn't slow. Something was screwy with the electrical system, all right. Still, the lights shutting off just as we'd made our wishes had felt eerie. Magical even. A ridiculous notion. Magic was for children and movies and fantasy novels.

Shaking off the tingles dancing up my arms, I moved aside my empty wineglass—*glass three*—and reached for "the red."



Glass four disappeared quickly, too. We linked arms and traipsed outside on a happy high. I was on the talkative side of tipsy, Reckless Rachel hovering below the surface. We crossed the quiet street, the spring air cool enough to bring the bars and streetlights into focus. My promising future had me leaning my head back to gulp in the possibilities. Gwen waved down a cab, and I hummed to myself, practically floating.

This birthday felt different, our wishes holding more weight. I wouldn't treat it lightly. When the timing was right, I'd quit my job and follow my (yet to be determined) dreams, and my life would be more than fine. It would be *exciting* and *rewarding* and *fun*. It would be zestful! A zesterific life! Completely zestastic!

A drunk giggle tripped off my tongue, but the sound died on a heavy sigh. Bad Boy was across the street, leaving the bar, that swagger of his ever present. I watched him like I would a spider crawling near my leg—fear, intrigue, and fascination intermingling. He pushed into a blue door a few buildings down. The sign above the bar read *The Blue Door*.

The sight of him had me wishing I'd accepted his drink offer. A sketchy thought. I'd been tempted by a rebel once, an experience I'd rather not repeat. I stared at that door anyway, desire curling through my blood stream. If my wish suddenly *was* a magical thing, I'd spin it on its head. I'd wish I could handle one wild night with Bad Boy. Not get shy. Not lock up when naked in front of a stranger, as though having sex for the first time. I'd let him ride me—no, *I'd ride him*—until the sun kissed the sky.

“We've made a decision.”

I turned to Ainsley, unaware they'd been talking. “What?”

“We're getting in a cab,” she said, her voice even raspy after yelling in Vesper, “and you're following your tongue into The Blue Door.”

“No way.” Was I that transparent? As lonely as I'd been, as many bad dates as I'd endured, I hadn't realized how unfulfilled my body was until I'd watched couples flirt in the bar, a guest at a show. Until Bad Boy had touched me.

“Yes way.” Ainsley tucked my hair behind my ear. “Rachel, this is your birthday. *Our* birthday. You've been kind of down lately, and we think you need to let loose. Have fun. Not everything in your life has to fit into your spreadsheets. He's not the type of guy you date or take home to meet Mom. I know you want that, but sometimes you have to turn things upside down to find your feet.”

“You did see how hot he was, right?” Gwen added. “Don't tell me you weren't picturing all the ink he had under that shirt. Go out and have fun.” She hit me with her trouble grin—one corner of her mouth kicked up, her eyes narrowed yet twinkling. The grin she'd unleashed the night of the Dildo Incident.

Reckless Rachel stirred to life.

But who was she kidding? *Me* have fun with the guy who heard me scream pussy? The kinky freak? “What if he has body parts in his freezer?”

Gwen raised her phone. “I’m friends with the bartender at The Blue Door, and I’ve already texted him. Turns out he knows the Lone Wolf and says he’s a decent guy, family owns a winery or something. But if he turns out to be a creeper, all you have to do is tell Cameron. He’ll make sure you find a cab.” Again with her trouble grin.

The same grin that now tugged at my lips.

Nothing about walking into a bar to stalk a stranger was smart, but I was amped up, my *fine* life and *fine* job itching at me until the urge to scream or dance or proposition a bad, *bad* boy had my blood thrumming. A cool breeze whispered across my back, echoing the sensation of Bad Boy’s fingers, but nowhere near as sweet.

“Go,” Ainsley said as she patted my ass.

“Hall of Fame Fuck,” Gwen reminded me.

Heart in my throat, my string of painful dates and lonely nights coaxing me on (as well as four glasses of wine), I let Reckless Rachel out to play.

## CHAPTER TWO

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JIMMY

I should never have walked into Vesper. I'm not sure what idiocy drove me there. Curiosity, maybe. Wondering if I'd feel like an outcast, or if the clinking of glasses and flashing of perfect teeth would prompt nostalgia. I didn't miss it, exactly, but the familiarity scraped at me. Two years ago, my styled hair and designer shirts would have fit in with the Rolex-wearing crowd. But that was an eternity and a different guy ago.

The Blue Door was more my speed—unpretentious people, guitar licks strumming from the speakers, hushed conversations at cramped tables, and, most important, a killer wine list.

I fell onto a stool at the empty bar and pushed my hand through my hair. I nodded to Cameron. “Any good Russian River Pinots?”

He spun around like usual, no hesitation in his reach. He pulled the Lynmar Pinot Noir down from his wall of bottles and held the label toward me. “Black raspberry on the nose, floral notes, smooth tannins.”

He nailed all of that, even if he hadn't mentioned the hints of cardamom, but he should have known better than to offer me a 2011 Pinot. “Are you new?” I said, and he chuckled. “I'm not after anything from that mess of a drenched season. Try again.”

Instead of telling me off, he smirked. A smirk that widened as he put me on hold to check his phone. His gaze jumped to the door, then back to me, his grin widening as he texted someone. “Something tells me I have just the thing for you tonight.” He glanced over my shoulder again, and I frowned at the still-closed door.

“Hit me with it,” I said, unsure what he kept staring at.

Cameron, with his inked sleeves, didn’t look the part of the wine geek. Not that I did anymore, either. But I’d warmed that barstool enough to test his wine knowledge, and he rarely disappointed. He went right for the 2013 Foursight. That killer season had produced fruit-intense grapes, and Foursight was a boutique winery, everything made in small batches. My weakness.

At my nod, he grabbed a glass from the rack above his head. The deep ruby liquid swirled up the sides as he poured.

I stuck my nose in the crystal and inhaled scents of ripe berries and damp earth, hints of rhubarb teasing me. *Fucking sensual*. “Why didn’t you start with this?”

My first sip was perfection.

“I like screwing with you. Most people pretend to know their wine. It’s nice serving someone who isn’t full of shit.”

“I know a thing or two.” Or a thousand and two. My blood practically pumped with the divine nectar, my ancestors having grown grapes when all of Greece revered the gods.

Two years ago, when my life imploded, I avoided anything and everything to do with wine. I tossed my collection and drank beer and hung out in dive bars, hair growing longer, tattoo collection building. Buying the Harley I’d had a hard-on for since twelfth grade eased the sting, but nothing erased my anger. Still, I couldn’t stay away. Not from wine. Not from the lure of a Pinot as pure and ripe as the Foursight. Plus, staying away meant my family won, when they all deserved to be gloriously, ceremoniously fucked over.

Cameron grabbed a glass from the washer behind him and shined it from stem to rim, before hanging it on the overhead

rack. The same end-of-night routine I did when closing up Rudy's Tavern.

His attention kept flitting to the door, but he said, "You should enter that sommelier contest. Odds are it'll be filled with wannabes and egos."

I swished a sip around my mouth and swallowed. "What contest?"

He dropped his cloth, grabbed a flyer farther down the bar, and slapped it on the wood next to me. "Sommelier of the Century. Some lame attempt for the Adriano brothers to dig themselves out of the hole they've sunk in. Their restaurants have been tanking, and they're trying to attract attention. Press."

"Sounds like bullshit."

"Maybe, but the opportunity is no joke. Head sommelier position is up for grabs, for all three restaurants, and it's open to anyone who's ever uncorked a bottle. With that kind of prize and no background needed, it'll be a circus. But entertaining."

Probably would be a laugh, but if Cameron knew my background, he'd never have suggested it. My résumé was a wet dream for most restaurateurs, no sommelier position out of my reach. My lats bunched as memories scratched under my skin, the thoughts more unpleasant than sipping a corked Merlot.

I stretched my neck, and my mind wandered to the club and that proper girl and her dirty mouth. A nice diversion for my acerbic thoughts.

She'd sat at her table, back straight, shoulders locked in perfect posture, hands folded on her lap. It had me wanting to unlace her fingers, dip my head down, and lick her until she pulled my mouth against her wet heat, her crossed legs trembling for hours. She was even better close up, a spray of freckles covering her sun-kissed skin.

So California. So innocent. A princess with a dirty mouth.

Who'd turned me down.

While Cameron continued with his nightly clean, I blinked the disappointment away and read the flyer on the bar. The Adriano brothers were San Francisco celebrities, but their restaurants had slipped from hot spots to backup plans. The contest was smart marketing, a way to shine a light on their venture while involving the city. What caught my eye, though, and halted my throat mid-sip of wine, was the bullet point at the bottom:

*After two months of tasting sessions and elimination rounds, the best two contestants will work the restaurant on June 28th, serving top wine writers and reviewers to determine the winner.*

Top wine writers. In one place. On one night.

An idea caught, a taste of justice a hell of a lot sweeter than the Pinot Noir finally traveling down my throat. A chance to right a wrong that should never have happened. It would mean being a finalist in that farce of a contest, but like Cameron said, the circus would attract more wannabes than wine devotees, and I could taste the best under the table. I'd just have to use a different last name.

As I sipped my wine, my tension less acute, a feminine voice said, "Is that drink still on offer?"

After the flyer and the potential it held, I grinned. The first true smile I'd unleashed in months. I slid my gaze to the dirty princess and took in her fidgety hands.

Her deep brown eyes flitted over the room, landing repeatedly on the door. Ready to escape? I was revved up, her reappearance in my field of vision too perfect to back off. I'd enjoyed women the past couple of years, would lose myself in their soft skin and heady moans, but the release was always short-lived.

With my mind still processing my plan, the night now felt more like a celebration than escape. Who better to toast with than the contradiction before me?

"Drink's on offer. Under one condition."

She hesitated, working her fingers over one another, still glancing at the exit. Then she clenched her hands, dropped her arms to her sides, and met my eyes. “What condition?”

I leaned toward her, so close I could see each freckle dotting the ridges of her lips. “I hear you say pussy again.”

Her eyes snapped wide, her posture even straighter than before. “Sorry. I should go. This was a bad idea.”

As she turned, I grabbed her elbow. “I’m joking.” *Sort of.* “It was worth saying that to see the look on your face. Promise, I don’t bite.” Unless she asked me to.

At least the comment drew her attention to my mouth. I gestured toward Cameron. “We even have a chaperone. One drink. And I might need an explanation for your outburst earlier.”

She shifted on her heels and swung her attention to Cameron. Something passed between them, as though they knew each other. When he nodded, a slight tilt of his head, she seemed to relax. “Okay. One drink.”

The night was looking up. She settled onto the stool beside me, her spine still ramrod straight. She tucked her elbows to her sides.

“What’s your poison?” I asked.

“Apparently dangerous men I don’t know, but I’ll have a glass of the Lynmar Pinot.”

I could do dangerous. “If I’m your poison after two minutes, imagine how you’ll feel in a few hours.” That earned me a long swallow from her. “She’ll have the Foursight,” I added to Cameron. It was sweet how confident she was ordering that wine, but her lips would taste so much better after a sip from my glass.

She shot me a look, her freckles sharp against her reddening cheeks. “Pretty sure I can order for myself, and I’d like the Lynmar.”

“You don’t want the Lynmar. 2011 was a shit year. Trust me.” No need to bore her about the early rains that season and

the lack of fruit. Better to get her a glass and steer the conversation back to pussy. Hers, specifically.

“Actually I do want the Lynmar.”

Cameron moved to grab the bottle, but I held up my hand. He halted.

To her, I said, “I’ve been sipping the Foursight since I got here. You telling me you don’t want a taste?”

Her attention dropped to my lips again, and she grazed her teeth over hers. Fire sparked in her brown eyes. “I may want a taste of that wine. Later. For now I want the Lynmar.”

“It’s inferior.”

“It’s splendid.”

“The season was crap.”

“The season was hard, not crap.”

“The Foursight is a sure thing,” I said. She must have seen the heat in my gaze.

“I like the underdog,” she countered, a sultry note to her voice. “Finding a diamond in the rough. The vines that survived 2011 were stronger, and a few vintages shone. Like the Lynmar. Hints of spice. Creamy mouthfeel.” A quiet hum passed her lips.

Okay. The girl knew her wine, and my attraction to her spiked. With the haunts I’d been frequenting, and my bartending gig at Rudy’s Tavern, I hadn’t been around a woman like her in ages. No visible ink, her outfit more conservative than racy. Her straight brown hair would look sexy as hell tangled in my fist. “You sure you don’t want to skip to the mouthfeel part?”

She smiled freely, the first hint of her letting loose. “I’m still not sure how bitter the aftertaste will be.”

My answering grin was just as carefree. “I know how to make it sweet, Sunshine.”

She barely reacted, but her nostrils flared. “Then get me a glass of the Lynmar.”

“You’ll regret it.”

“I’m already regretting walking in here.”

I chuckled, unsure the last time flirting had been this much fun. “How about a bet?”

“I don’t bet with strangers.”

“But you have drinks with them?”

She paused. “What sort of bet?”

Between her rejection at Vesper and her stiff posture now, sitting beside me was probably pushing her beyond her limits. Limits I wanted to test. The women I’d messed around with weren’t tough to reel in. We were always after the same thing: a fun night between the sheets. The girl at my side was tipsy, but not so drunk she didn’t know what she was after. Something told me if I could unlace her, it would be lightyears beyond fun.

“You do a blind tasting of the Foursight and the Lynmar,” I said. “If you *can’t* tell them apart, then I buy you a glass of my choosing, and I get to taste it on your lips. At my place.”

“That escalated fast.” So did her breathing.

“Did you want this to go slow?”

Instead of turning me down, she said, “If I win...if I guess each wine, what do I get?”

“You tell me.”

“A winery?”

I barked out a laugh, but there was nothing funny about her joke. Two years ago, I’d have been able to ante up. “Might be out of my budget. Anything else?”

She looked at me through lowered lashes. “My place.”

Now we were getting somewhere.

I leaned in nice and slow, her ragged breaths shallowing as I neared her ear. “Sounds like we have a deal.”

At my instruction, Cameron poured two glasses out of sight while we sat in silence, but my mystery date’s eyes spoke

volumes. Her attention lingered on my forearms, traveling over the ink. When I curved my arm around the back of her chair, her gaze swept to my chest, to the chain dipping below my shirt. Its weight felt heavier than usual, or maybe it was her rapt attention.

She hooked her crossed legs tighter, and all I wanted was to slip my hand between her thighs, over the thick denim, and feel the heat radiating from her.

Instead I toyed with the ends of her straight hair. I rolled them between my fingers. She nearly purred, and lust pooled in my groin. What would she sound like on the edge of her orgasm?

When Cameron set down the glasses, she straightened and tried to shake my hand from her hair. I didn't budge, and she didn't push. She swirled the glasses, raising each to her nose in turn. A straight nose with a slight slope in the center, those same freckles dotting the ridge. Each inhale sent her upper back into my palm, and when she tipped the first glass for a sip, I slipped my fingers below her hair and cupped her neck.

The wine never met her lips.

"That's cheating," she said, a quiver tumbling over her shoulders.

I dragged my thumb down the side of her neck, along the delicate vein that pulsed below the surface. "My hand is nowhere near the wine or your mouth. How exactly am I cheating?"

"You play dirty."

"If this night goes according to plan, you'll find out just how dirty."

Her wineglass shook, but she didn't shrug me off. Without further delay, she sipped both wines, swishing the liquid around her mouth. She closed her eyes as she swallowed. My hand stayed on her neck, and I had to restrain myself from pressing my lips to the dip at her collarbone, to feel the speed of her pulse.

She tapped her left glass. “The Lynmar. Cherry cola and cranberry on the front end with a hint of smoke and fig on the finish. Silky texture.” She ran a slender finger over the stem of the right glass. “The Foursight is also stunning, but any winemaker worth their salt can make something beautiful out of the 2013 harvest. The Lynmar proves skill and perseverance bring success.”

Passion bled through her words, as though she were talking about more than vintages, and her conviction stirred something in my chest. It had been a lifetime since I’d really talked wine with someone, shared my passion. Although I couldn’t stay away from viticulture, I didn’t twist the knife in my gut by attending tastings or trading notes with enthusiasts. The back-and-forth I shared with Cameron was as close to discussions as I’d get.

“It’s a valid point, but there’s no arguing with excellence. 2013 bred excellence. Being the best of a shitty year doesn’t make for the kind of wine that brings your taste buds to their knees.” I turned to Cameron. “Is she right?”

“She is. The lady knows her wine.”

Like I needed to find her more attractive. “Looks like you win. Shall we get a cab?”

Her shoulders hitched back toward her ears, the pulse below my finger revving, and an adorable, nervous laugh bubbled out of her. She grabbed the flyer at my side and scanned it, a reminder I should tuck it in my pocket before leaving.

She toyed with the corner of the page. “Just so you know, I never do this sort of thing.”

That had me frowning. She’d walked into the bar looking for me, or something I could offer her. A craving I felt in spades, but I’d only go there if she was all in. “I need an elaboration.”

“The one-night-stand thing. I don’t do them. I mean, I’ve had casual sex, but it’s never happened on the first date. Or the second. Not that this is a date. Obviously. But the only reason

I'm here is because my friends peer pressured me, and there was a fourth glass of wine, and Cameron messaged one of them that you don't have children locked in your basement."

Mental note to thank Cameron, and damn if her honesty wasn't refreshing as hell. Candor that had her pulling away, the promise of unravelling her inhibitions slipping through my fingers. I'm not sure why I walked into Vesper earlier. I'd avoided women like her the past two years, for good reason. But her innocence, potential dirty mouth, and how she savored her wine had me tied in knots.

"Are you attracted to me?" I asked.

She angled her knees my way, a blush creeping up her freckled chest. "Yes."

"That's half the battle. The other half is this." I placed my free hand on her knee, gentle pressure, the antithesis of the fire building under my skin. "I don't remember the last time I've wanted to rip a woman's clothing off her so badly. If you let me, I'll have you relaxed with one touch."

Her shoulders trembled. "Because you do this often?"

"The one-night thing?" She nodded, and I held her gaze. I didn't lie to women; I knew how devastating lies could be. She either got on board with the little I had to offer, or I'd let her walk away. "I've done this, yes. If I have an itch, I scratch it. But it's not a weekly occurrence. By the looks of things, I'd wager you're itchy as hell." One of my hands was still on her neck, the other on her knee, a connection I hated to relinquish. I dragged my thumb under the edge of her jaw. "Bet I could ease the burn for you."

Her eyelids fluttered, her long lashes almost blond toward their tips. "How about a rule?"

"I'm game."

"No names. No strings. One night, and that's it. If I know I'll never see you again, I might be able to relax and enjoy myself. And even though I won your little game, I'd prefer your place. More wine will help, too."

I'd normally have talked and joked less with a woman before taking her home, but I would have learned her name. Basic conversation. No fun bets and intriguing wine discussions.

I could live without names, though, and no strings was the only way I rolled. "Done. I still need to know why you shouted 'eating pussy' at Vesper."

She shook her head at the ceiling. "My friend and I were bitching about guys and how much easier it would be if we were lesbians. Then we started talking about the logistics of it, but the music was loud and we were shouting when it shut off, hence the incident."

Again she had me wanting to know more, ask more. "What was the result of this conversation? Are you curious? Interested in experimenting with women?"

"You sure are nosy for a one-night stand."

"It's not every day a woman shouts 'pussy' in a club."

"Alcohol and I have a love-hate relationship." She paused, attention fixed on her fingers until she smirked. "I said that if I were with a woman, I'd probably freeze up."

"Because?" I was taunting her, testing how far I could push her boundaries.

She sipped her wine, her nose lingering in the glass. The rim was barely out of her lips when she said, "Change of topic, please."

Those boundaries wouldn't bend easily, but I enjoyed a challenge. I leaned in close and dragged my nose along her cheek, breathing deep along the way. She smelled like the ocean—mint and jasmine mingling with her arousal. "Whatever you want, Sunshine."

## CHAPTER THREE

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RACHEL

I attempted to peel my eyes open, but my lids were dry and gritty. The movement sent bursts of pain through my body. Everything ached—my head, my back, my calves all throbbed in unison. Maybe I'd been hit by a Mack Truck, or bulldozed by a derailing train. Possibly dropped from an airplane to test if girls dumb enough to follow strange men into bars could withstand the plummet to Earth.

The light streaming through the window made me wince, another sharp stab slicing through my temples. I fought the urge to melt back into the mattress and blinked. Or tried, at least. My eyelids were glued to my contacts.

A few thousand blinks later, I rolled my tongue around my gums. My mouth was thick and stale, like I'd eaten one of Ainsley's vegan desserts.

As I took in my surroundings—the unfamiliar ceiling, the too-soft mattress, the closet with more clothing on the floor than on the hangers, *the large body beside me*—the dryness in my mouth amplified, sourness following. I clamped a hand over my lips to prevent the violent reaction churning in my gut from decorating the floor.

Some heavy swallowing and a few breaths through my nose later, the feeling subsided, but not the horror. I was as stark as naked got, and from the looks of the tattooed back beside me, so was my bedmate. Too embarrassed to glance

Bad Boy's way, I assessed my aches and pains, and the tenderness between my thighs. Sex had definitely happened.

In this bed. With me. And that man.

Hopefully that man.

For all I knew, there could have been other players involved.

Lying as still as possible, I racked my brain, desperate to remember details of the evening. I squinted hard enough to increase my headache, but only snippets came back.

*Me* spilling wine? *Us* on the floor?

I was pretty sure laughing happened, too, but no images of his body hovering over mine resurfaced, or of him pushing into me, or me riding him, or us ripping off each other's clothes. I had no idea where his apartment even was.

At least the night of the Dildo Incident, I didn't black out. The recollection was hazy, but I remembered traipsing down the street with Ainsley and Gwen and dragging them into a sex shop. We cackled at the toys, and some sections of time were blurry, but the part with me running out the door, waving a massive dildo, screaming, "I have a penis," was kind of hard to forget.

For the life of me, I couldn't remember the details of my night with Bad Boy.

I didn't know his name. That part was clear, along with my one-night-stand rules that had led us here. So was sitting in the bar, him all know-it-all about his wines, pushing me to drink what he deemed acceptable. As was the masculine energy radiating off him as he'd promised to relax me with one touch. A touch lost in translation courtesy of Reckless Rachel.

How many drinks did we have? Did I have an orgasm afterward? Multiple?

God, I hoped we used condoms.

Gingerly, so as not to wake the guy who *may* have been a Hall of Fame Fuck, I slipped out from the covers and stood. I nearly fell back down. Pain. Lots of pain tightening around my

scalp, and tenderness on my tailbone. More pain than my twenty-first birthday and the ten million tequila shots. My tongue felt swollen. I teetered, and the room swayed. When I remembered my naked body, I got over my nausea and hauled ass into the bathroom.

Where I promptly saw four condoms in the trash.

*Four.*

A rush of pride swelled at the sight. *I totally rocked Bad Boy's sex world.* But those condoms hadn't necessarily come from us. Not all, at least. He'd seemed honest in the bar, admitting he'd taken a number of women to bed. That bed. The bed I'd slept on. Naked. I shivered, suddenly itchy all over. Remembered games of catching cooties as a kid had me wrinkling my nose. *That* I could remember.

But not fucking Bad Boy *four times.*

I splashed water on my face, but it did little to dull my headache or sober me up. I was still drunk as a skunk. Where did that saying even come from? Was it because my breath stunk? Because I could clear a room with one word?

I grabbed Bad Boy's toothpaste and used my finger to scrub my tongue and teeth and gums, all the while eyeing his meager toiletries: razor (which clearly hadn't been used in a while), shaving cream (ditto), and a toothbrush. My sink with its plethora of moisturizers and eye creams had *girl* written all over it.

I sucked back as much water as possible and grabbed a towel from his hook. The blue cotton was clean and plush. It smelled like leather and clove and a hint of musk. I might never recall what went down between Bad Boy and me, but my regret over the situation ebbed. At least I'd done something fun. Something out of character.

Something to start my twenty-seventh year with a *bang.*

Unfortunately, my attraction to him brought with it painful memories, too. Of my time with Gabe, which led to my father's last words, forever saved on my phone.

I shook my head. This was just one night. One wild fling. Nothing more. Except an uncomfortable feeling welled up, and something hazy niggled at me. One of those blurry memories, linked to the birthday wish maybe—my resolution to find a fulfilling career—but the source of my dread remained obscured.

Clutching the towel around my chest, I shrugged off my worry and eased open the bathroom door. I tiptoed into the bedroom. My clothes were strewn over the hardwood floor, as though we'd been harried and frantic to remove them, and the sheets were a mess. God, I wished I remembered what had happened. My gaze cut to Bad Boy, one last peek before leaving and never seeing him again. This time I *looked*.

He'd shifted since I'd gotten up. The covers hovered around his knees, the ends of his black hair curled at the base of his neck. His back and ass were displayed for prime viewing, and *what a view*. Ink swept over the grooves and creases of his toned physique, some images reminiscent of the Greek art I'd studied during my *I'm going to be a curator!* phase. He was lean but fit, the boxing gloves hanging from his wooden dresser likely the source of his build. With one arm tucked below his pillow and the other thrown in front of his face, the ridges of his ribs and hips stood out, so delicious I barely refrained from crawling on the bed and running my fingers over every dip and curve.

My attention moved to his ass, and the red marks on his left butt cheek—four marks, long and thin, that could have come from my nails. Wow. My fingers tingled as though *they* remembered gripping that toned flesh to force him deeper. The tenderness between my thighs tingled, too, but the longer I stared, the more the lust gathering in my core curdled, and that dread returned. Heavier this time. Foreboding so thick my nausea resurfaced as a lost memory teased me.

His ass. Something happened with his ass. No. Not his ass. His *butt crack*? Jesus, what the hell had happened? The memory advanced and receded, out of my grasp. I blinked and refocused, no longer scoping his chiseled form. All I could see

was his butt, knowing deep, deep down that something bad went down.

Something very bad.

Then it clicked, the rush so forceful all air left my lungs.

Not his ass. *My* ass. Oh, God. Still clutching the towel around my chest, I scooped up my clothes and purse and ran from his room, falling to my knees the second I was out. I dumped the contents of my purse on the floor, and snatched up my phone, all the while whispering, “God, no. *Nononononono*. Please, *no*.”

But there was no undoing what I’d done.

I pulled up my sent emails, and there it was, what might as well have been a neon billboard that said “You Are So Screwed.” I’d emailed my sexual-harassing boss a photo of my butt crack with the subject line: Shove your crappy job where the sun don’t shine.

Holy mother of God.

Stupid alcohol and that stupid resolution *to quit my job*. Even worse was that Bad Boy must have taken the photo, because *my* two hands, each holding up a middle finger on either side of my *butt crack* (seriously?), couldn’t have snapped the selfie to end all selfies.

Unfreakingbelievable.

Never again would I drink a glass of wine. Not a drop. Never let Reckless Rachel out to play. Bad Boy should never have happened. I should never have made that wish.

*What the hell am I going to do?*

I stared ahead, not seeing a thing. Shock leached my energy. Hunching lower and lower, I spun the possibilities, anything to undo what I’d done. Set fire to our office building? Divert attention from my idiocy by instigating World War Three? Enter the Witness Protection Program?

It was Saturday, and my boss never worked on weekends. In fact, he’d mentioned having issues with his server, something about incoming messages disappearing...which

meant he wouldn't have seen my ass yet. He might not see it at all. The room swayed, a slow undulation—the wine still swimming through my veins—but my spirits rose.

All was not lost, *yet*.

Still queasy, I lay on my back and shoved my feet into my jeans, wiggling to get them done up. Once dressed, I folded Bad Boy's towel and hung it over the end of his leather couch, taking in my surroundings for the first time. His bedroom may have been on the messy side, but the open kitchen/living room was simple and neat. But not homey. His white walls were harsh, not a photograph visible; only a couch, coffee table, and TV filled the space. There wasn't even a dinner table or chairs.

The starkness was *sad*.

I'd made it clear this was a no-strings affair, but it was odd leaving him in bed, sleeping, this lonely apartment all he'd wake up to. No thank you note. No kiss goodbye. After he'd snapped that shot of my ass, and whatever had transpired between us, I'd never be able to meet his eyes anyway. Better to forget this ever happened.

As soon as I made it to the street, I pulled out my phone and called Gwen. Ainsley often worked on weekends, shopping for her clients. Plus Gwen's "I know the bartender" was partly responsible for this fiasco.

Three rings later, she picked up. "Please tell me he was an epic lay."

"I would, if I could remember what happened."

"How much did you drink?"

"A buttload." Which was an actual measurement of wine. A butt or barrel of wine held precisely one hundred and twenty-six gallons. Apparently when one drank a *buttload* they sent shots of their *butt* into cyberspace.

I cringed.

"Did you go shopping for dildos again?"

I was in no mood for her teasing. "Hilarious, but no. It was a thousand times worse than the dildo." People jostled me as I

scoped the street and realized I was only a few blocks from my place. Funny how I could live so close to a man as hot as Bad Boy and never have run into him. “I did a bad thing, and I’m on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I need you to talk me off the ledge.”

I spilled my shame as I walked home, prompting Gwen to laugh for a solid three minutes. “That,” she panted between breaths, “goes down as one of your more epic drunk sprees. I still don’t understand how you could have forgotten the entire sexcapade, unless he wasn’t good. Then it’s for the best. But what a waste of a one-night stand.”

“That’s the least of my problems.” It was like she hadn’t even heard the part about my *butt crack* sent to *my boss*. At least focusing on that horror allowed me to ignore Bad Boy’s participation in my fall from grace. Mortification to the nth degree.

I stopped in front of my apartment, the sidewalk bending under my still-inebriated gaze. “What if my boss gets the email? What will I do?”

“Move to Siberia.”

I giggled, even though there was nothing amusing about this situation. The giggle grew, an uncontrollable laugh quaking my body, culminating in an unattractive snort. My world was about to come crashing down, and I had to squeeze my knees together to stop from piddling on the street.

“You really are still drunk, aren’t you?” Gwen’s amusement didn’t help.

I *was* still drunk. And anxious, the latter responsible for my mad cackle—aka my nervous laugh that was a cross between a wheezing emphysema patient and a two-year-old giggling at a fart joke. Gwen and Ainsley loved to get me going, if only to witness The Cackle in action.

“Yes,” I said, my laughter under control, my anxiety unfortunately not. “Definitely still drunk. And freaked out.”

“Okay,” she said, adopting her *I’m serious* voice, “I get that. But can we discuss this whole job thing a sec?”

“Maybe...” I pressed my back against my apartment’s brick exterior. It was either that or slide to the sidewalk. I readied myself for a dose of Gwen Truth.

Gwen was an expert at reading people. She worked at an adoption agency and spent her days interviewing candidates, making sure babies landed in the right homes. She also called me on my bullshit. When I’d convinced myself becoming a tattoo artist was my calling—I’d always been able to draw, and no diploma was needed—she’d dragged me into a parlor, ranting that I couldn’t tattoo others without knowing how it felt.

We no longer spoke of the incident.

She cleared her throat. “Fact is, you hate being a loan officer. You hate it more than when you had to perform reiki on the creep with the perma hard-on, and probably more than that Thai massage gig. I don’t even know how you touched those hairy guys. Granted, going out with this epic sendoff isn’t ideal, but it will force you to find something better. You need to make a change.”

A change I’d wished for last night. Maybe this was another form of Russian roulette, with my job instead of drinking to unleash Reckless Rachel. My boss may get my email. He may not. If he did, I’d be forced to realize my wish, which was more like a New Year’s resolution. It would compel me to face my future head on, ready or not. But having a paycheck while researching careers would be preferable.

The bruise on my tailbone pulsed. I winced as the throbbing along my temples renewed. “I planned on quitting eventually, just not flashing my boss in the process, and not without a plan. Every time I’ve been fired or I’ve quit, I haven’t had anything lined up. I think that’s why I’ve rushed into jobs. The pressure, maybe? The need to make rent forced me into bad situations.”

“I know, love. I’m sorry you mooned your boss.”

Words I never thought I’d hear.

I almost asked her about the power outage that had followed our wishes, if she'd felt a change in the air, too. It could have been the drinks or my desire to believe something bigger would help change my life, but I could have sworn a wisp of magic had danced up my arms. Better not to admit that out loud. Especially since that type of thinking was probably responsible for my drunken lapse in judgment.

Gwen suggested I inhale Advil and water before we hung up. An excellent idea. When this hangover wore off, I'd feel better. I'd play *job* roulette and hope for the best. If that butt shot disappeared in cyberspace, I'd put the incident behind me. I'd move on from this catastrophic night. Considering I had no memory of the sex-fest with Bad Boy, and I'd never see him again, forgetting it would be a cinch.

But my phone pinged when I opened my apartment door. A message from my boss greeted me: *I wouldn't use me as a reference.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

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RACHEL

Monday morning arrived to the tune of UB40's "Red Red Wine," the soundtrack to my downfall. Ignoring the subliminal message trilling from my alarm, I spent the morning reorganizing. My wardrobe consisted of blocks of order—nine-piece ensembles that could carry me from day to night to day again with the switch of an accessory. After I arranged each outfit by season, I polished the glasses on my open shelves and set them in perfect lines. Then I made my bed, tucking my lilac sheets snug enough to please a sergeant.

My goal: If I kept my visible life in order, the underlying mess may go unnoticed.

With those tasks completed, I scrolled the internet for possible jobs: Professional butter sculptor? Dog behaviorist? Pornography historian? Maybe I'd start a national walk-a-thon, all proceeds donated to Unemployed Girls with Bad Judgment.

Every few minutes, I'd dirty-look my wine fridge. *Nope. Never drinking again.* But the bottles prompted me to search winemaking careers. The notion of selecting grapes, overseeing the crushing and fermentation process, of bringing joy to people through each glass, was tempting. Wine also reminded me of my father, nights uncorking bottles the most vivid memories I had. The more I learned about wine, the

closer I felt to him. Sometimes I'd pour a glass of a delicious new discovery by his gravestone.

My throat burned, a familiar sadness engulfing me. He'd missed another birthday. Another year of family dinners and baseball games. Some things never got easier.

Including the prospect of returning to school.

Two to three years of full-time studies, followed by an apprenticeship, when most of my endeavors had lasted but a few months, didn't make sense. Piling school loans on top of my rent and bills wasn't feasible, either. Not when I was determined to support myself. Frustrated with my fruitless searching, I plunked my forehead on my desk.

My cell rang.

The sight of my mother's name dampened my mood further. If I answered her, I'd have to admit I'd gotten fired *again*. Or had I quit? I didn't even know the truth of it. But delaying the inevitable seemed like more headache than it was worth. And I'd ignored her call last night...

Steeling my nerves, I pressed Talk. "Hey, Ma."

"I might be late for lunch today. If you get to Andros first, get us a table outside."

Crap. *Lunch*. I squeezed my eyes shut. So overwrought, I'd forgotten my mother wanted to treat me to a belated birthday outing. "Not sure I can make it."

Or deal with her crazy.

"Nonsense. We planned this weeks ago. I'll see you later."

She hung up. I stared at nothing and cursed my life.

An hour later, I waited at Andros, dressed in my gray skirt, heels, and white blouse, as though I'd come from the job I no longer had. My mother breezed in, oblivious to my deception.

She slung her massive purse over the back of her chair with a sigh. Her blond hair was sprayed into a solid block, her painted-on eyebrows and pink lipstick likely to melt in the heat. "I wouldn't have been late, but the cleaning lady came

today. Last time she made my bed, she put the pillows backward, so I had to show her *again* how I like it. I swear, I should just do it myself.”

Lydia Kates majored in melodrama. “Why don’t you?”

She raised *one* eyebrow, a skill I could never master. “You know how busy I am with the Healing Hearts luncheon. I’m not Superwoman. I’ve had to spend time with Alyssa, too. Things have been tough for her at home.”

I could mention five to ten hours of volunteering a week shouldn’t limit her from making beds and mopping the floor, but I’d pushed her to get involved. Helping raise money for the heart disease that took my father’s life had been her first step to regaining hers, and she’d met women like Alyssa through the foundation. Other women who’d suffered loss. I’d never belittle the effort.

“And did I tell you,” she went on, “that your aunt Sarah’s sister-in-law, Dahlia, just got diagnosed with liver cancer? Not even fifty, and The Cancer? If life were fair, those reality stars with their skimpy clothes and sex videos would get The Cancer, not poor Dahlia.”

I winced as others glanced our way, judgment in their pinched faces. My mother only had one volume—loud nasal—and on a scale from one to Mel Gibson, the woman’s inappropriateness hovered at Charlie Sheen. “I wouldn’t go wishing cancer on people, Ma.”

“Anyway,” she said, talking over me, “I’ve just been a wreck and need to drop off some soup this week, so I’ll make extra. You’re looking thin, Rachel. Have you been cooking? I bet you’re eating nothing but takeout.”

The waiter arrived in time to save me the agony of listening to her concerns—*your arms are too thin, your skin looks pale, are you sleeping all right?* She’d tutted around my brother and me growing up, but this anxiety, this worry someone would get sick or hurt or worse, had developed since we lost my dad. I always let her fuss. Unless she took a page from Ainsley and commented on my boring clothes. I’d take

“plain Jane” any day over wearing my mother’s fuchsia blazer, complete with shoulder pads and a brooch the size of my face.

Our waiter smiled, clueless to his approaching doom. “Ready to order?”

He proceeded to write a novel on his order pad, ensuring my mother got her dressing on the side, roasted red peppers instead of red onion, green olives instead of black, no salt or feta, and an addition of chicken—poached, not seared—in her salad.

I smiled and said, “The regular Greek is fine for me.”

“Modifications are not a problem.” He gave me a wink. “I aim to please.”

Normally his blatant flirting would be cute. His strong nose and sharp cheekbones made him easy on the eyes, but attraction eluded me. I couldn’t help thinking of the tattooed back and sexy behind I’d left naked in bed two mornings ago. My mind may have been a blank where that night was concerned, but it was as though my body had perfect recall, my pulse revving for another glimpse of him. I shook the unpleasant thought away and ordered a glass of Riesling.

My no drinking motto lasted a whole two days.

My mother took the moment to latch onto the other thing I’d have preferred to avoid like the plague. “Have you spoken with your boss about a raise? You’ve put in three months, and no one works harder than my girl. If he doesn’t give you a raise soon, you’ll have to demand one.”

Time for the lies. “Three months isn’t that long, Ma.”

“Nonsense. Three months is long enough for him to know you’re a star.”

“I think you’re biased.”

“It’s God’s honest truth, Rachel. Any competent boss would see it.”

“That’s not how the business works.”

“Of course it is. You just need to stand up for what you deserve. Prove you’re not a wallflower.”

Pretty sure I’d proven that with my butt shot. “Enough, Ma. I’m not demanding a raise.” But her faith in me warmed my heart.

She lifted her chin, squinting in her all-seeing way, and that warmth seeped out. The woman knew something was up. The time I’d told her I was staying at Lexi Wallcott’s, my eyelid had twitched so incessantly my mother followed me to the house party and dragged me out by my ear.

My lying skills were up there with my ability to moonwalk.

I unfolded my napkin and smoothed it on my lap. I rearranged my cutlery next, avoiding my mother’s gaze. The flirty waiter brought me my wine, and I took a lengthy sip. I didn’t stop to smell the bouquet or swirl my glass, didn’t pick apart the nuances. But as the liquid slid down my throat, an image flashed, sharp and short: *Bad Boy’s body against mine as he licked wine from my lips*. Heat spiked between my thighs, the sensation potent and lingering. I could almost taste him, almost feel his fingers digging into my hips.

“Did you get fired?”

I plunked my glass down so hard, liquid sprayed my face. My mother didn’t miss a darn thing. I dabbed my nose with my napkin, planning my reply, but part of me wanted to savor that fleeting glimpse of my one-night stand. Flustered, I excused myself to the bathroom.

Where I washed my hands three times.

I could keep up my ruse, attempting to lie about my job, but there was no point. I’d played job roulette, and I lost. And maybe this was my destiny. Maybe my wish, the blackout, and Reckless Rachel had all happened for a reason. Inexplicable twists of fate occurred all the time. Just like my father’s final voice message.

Our last physical conversation had been a fight over Gabe, an encounter I hated to relive. But Dad had left me a message

afterward. The day he passed away, he called to apologize. To say he loved me, only wanted what was best for me. Two hours later, he fell on his treadmill, his heart too weak to keep him with us. He'd treated my brother to a surprise lunch that day, had sent my mother flowers. He'd almost said his goodbyes as though he knew his time was up.

Maybe my actions were subconscious, too. The blackout at the club could have been more than coincidence. It could have bewitched our wishes, a higher power guiding our lives. The embarrassing stunt that had led me here could have been a mortifying type of fate.

Fate that became clearer when my eyes locked on a poster.

The same flyer I'd seen at the bar with Bad Boy was taped to the wall—the sommelier contest to earn a position at three San Francisco restaurants. Vibrating with nerves and the urge to touch Bad Boy that night, I'd busied my hands by plucking at the corner of the page, reading and re-reading the advertisement. I read it again now, more intently.

Working in a restaurant wasn't ideal—my waitressing gigs in school had involved many forgotten orders and bad tips—but my current predicament shrunk my options. I had no job, no prospects, and being a sommelier wasn't like being a server. Talking wine with customers could be fun. Exciting even.

A seed of possibility planted itself behind my breastbone and grew. There was no going back from here. Only forward.

I also had a resolution to fill by next April.

I returned to my seat and clasped my hands on the table. "I wasn't fired," I told my mother. "I quit."

Which was in fact true.

Her hand shot to her heart. "You were doing so well. Finally working toward something. I'm sure if you explain it was a lapse in judgment, your boss will rehire you."

"Ma..."

“Tell him you haven’t been well. Take a week off if needed.”

“Ma...”

“Promise it won’t happen again. A reasonable man will understand.”

“*Ma*, I’m not groveling for my job. I quit because I hate being a loan officer.”

More truth offered.

She sagged, her shoulder pads curving forward. “I’m sorry. I just hate seeing you so unsettled. I only want the best for you.”

A heartfelt admission that echoed my father’s last words.

I wrapped my hand around her clenched fist. Her wedding ring nestled between my fingers. “I appreciate your concern, but I quit because...I have something lined up. Something I’ll actually enjoy.” I sipped my Riesling, notes of honeysuckle and wet stone lingering on my tongue, the memory of Bad Boy lingering, too.

My mother tilted her head and studied me. “If you have a job lined up, why lie about it?”

“It’s something new. I wanted to get settled before mentioning it.” There was no point discussing the sommelier contest unless I won. Admitting I’d failed at something else would only add fuel to her overprotective fire, and the lie tangled with enough fact to be passable.

She nodded, appeased. “If this doesn’t work out, I’m calling in a favor with Uncle Charlie. You’re twenty-seven, Rachel. It’s time to plant some roots. Mitchell works his tail off at his firm. It’s not fun, but he knows what he needs to do to succeed. You’ll have time for the fun stuff later.”

I *may* have earned enough diplomas to start a forgery business, but my younger brother’s law degree and stellar job poked holes in my confidence, his every leap forward a floodlight on my stalled career.

Thankfully our food arrived before she could go on about Mitchell's success or Uncle Charlie's funeral home. I'd been avoiding that particular connection for the whole of my adult life. Working around death, dressing lifeless bodies and watching people sob, was not happening. Still, the disappointment in my mother's eyes hit home. I'd worked hard to keep her spirits up since we'd lost Dad. The first two years had been hell for her. For me, too. But she'd been a shell of her former self. Five years later, her happiness remained priority one.

"Fine," I said, eager to appease her and switch topics. "If this new venture doesn't pan out, we'll talk to Uncle Charlie."

Since that wasn't an option, the sommelier gig had to work.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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JIMMY

The first day of the sommelier contest arrived without fanfare. Considering I'd waited two years to hatch the perfect plan and would finally deal with my family, I'd expected a bit more ceremony. A James Bond soundtrack, maybe.

But calm was fine. All I needed was the outcome.

The restaurant hadn't changed since it had opened four years ago. Egos inflated, the Adriano brothers had spared no expense and followed up their first two restaurants, Aroma and Blend, with Crush. Rave reviews piled up, and the wait list grew, all three hot spots offering killer wines and cool vibes. Crush still had a small tree growing in the center of the room, decorated with tiny white lights. The world class wines lining the back wall were as impressive as ever, the sleek wooden tables and white chairs cool and stylish.

The two major differences since I'd last visited were that, these days, a typical evening at Crush saw more empty chairs than full.

And I wasn't here with Sophia.

I swallowed the bitterness and scanned the space. Three quarters of the sixty-two seats were taken, each place set with five glasses, a sheet of paper, and a pen. I nabbed a chair at an empty foursome to keep my distance. Not that I needed to make the effort. The other contestants were business-casual

junkies, from the slick of their hair to the shine of their shoes. My torn jeans, biker boots, and faded “Dare Me” T-shirt were preppy repellents, which suited me fine.

I doubted a person here could discern a 2004 Screaming Eagle Cabernet Sauvignon from a 2005. Probably wouldn't be able to afford their three grand price tags, either.

A bottle I'd opened the other night without a thought.

Although I'd cleared wine from my life, there were a few purchases too precious to disown, the Screaming Eagle among them, and I'd popped a cork for my dirty princess. When she saw it (after rummaging through my cupboards—the nosy little thing), she'd gasped and draped herself over the bottle. I hadn't given two shits about impressing a girl in ages, but the urge to see her face after her first sip was too hard to resist. Wine, no matter the price, was meant to be enjoyed.

The second it had touched her tongue, her head lolled back, a glorious sigh following. A sight to behold. Watching her drink that wine had been as unforgettable as the first lick up her thigh. Normally my evenings with women weren't all-night affairs. We'd enjoy each other, chase our release, then say our goodbyes. They didn't leave me aching for more, but it had been two weeks since I'd fucked my dirty princess, and I'd replayed every taste and bite between us until I'd memorized the feel of her.

A habit I needed to kick.

The seats filled up, all but the few around me, men and women ages twenty to sixty fixing their suit jackets, crossing and uncrossing their legs. A nervous lot, the bunch of them. I couldn't deny the excitement twitching up my spine. Although I was on a mission, the thrill of tasting wine again was hard to ignore. A breath later, that excitement smacked me upside the head.

Pushing through the doors was the dirty princess herself, as though I'd conjured her.

She smoothed her gray pencil skirt, then adjusted the buttons of her white blouse. She touched her hair next, the

straight strands pulled into a ponytail. She wore as little makeup as the night I'd met her, but she was as done up as the rest of this uptight crowd. Difference was, I'd seen this particular woman throw her head back in ecstasy. My blood heated, the snippets I'd relived the past two weeks as fresh as ever.

*Her* moaning as she sucked me into her mouth.

*Me* sinking so deep inside her, I lost my mind.

*Us* laughing hysterically as we snapped that shot of her ass.

I'd barely cracked a smile the past two years, but I'd never howled like that with a woman. Never had to walk around, clutching my stomach to find my breath. I also couldn't recall having sex four times in one night because I simply couldn't get enough.

It was easy to chalk the wild evening up to me finally finding a way to deal with my family. Liberation had me ready to jump out of my skin. There was something more, though. The innocence of her freckle-stained face, willowy body, and big doe eyes as she told me to *fuck her hard* had shot my lust into overdrive. Now here she was again.

The last person I wanted to see.

She continued to adjust her clothes and clutch her purse, anxiety radiating from her in waves. The urge to walk over and test if my touch could ease her in the light of day like it had that night lit through me, unwelcome in its force.

Her jumpy gaze landed on me and her mouth dropped open. Steady chatter hummed through the space, but I could've sworn she squeaked. She clamped her jaw shut and searched the room for a free seat. Her frantic gaze was forced back to me, and the only three vacant spots. Again she searched in vain, the rounding of her spine a clue she wasn't thrilled about her options. She looked out the way she came, squeezed her eyes, then squared her shoulders and marched toward me.

Part of me—the lower half—wanted to pin her to the wall with my thighs while I hitched that proper little skirt higher. The other part hoped she'd wandered into the wrong place. Not because our night together had been shitty, or the fact that she'd disappeared without a trace. No. The thing that had the tendons in my neck bunching was remembering how *good* it all was. Too good and too much fun, and I'd imagined rounds two and three and four ad nauseam. But rounds always ended in a knockout punch.

This girl was nothing but trouble.

She paused at the table, drew in a long breath, mumbled something as she exhaled, then glared at the seat beside me and the ones across. She chose beside, probably to face the room.

The only reason we'd hooked up two weeks ago was because there were no names and no strings. She'd admitted how hard it would be for her to relax, how awkward she'd feel afterward. The relaxing part I took care of with one brush of my lips. The awkward was still alive and kicking.

What went down between us couldn't happen again. Distractions over the next two months weren't an option, and repeat affairs led to feelings, and feelings led to promises, and promises were nothing but lies dressed up to seduce. Not an outcome I was keen to revisit. Still, I couldn't ignore her anxiety, as long as she wasn't here because of me.

I leaned toward her. "You're the last person I expected to see."

She squished her lithe body farther from mine. "Kind of coincidental, don't you think? Did you follow me?"

"I got here before you. If anyone is stalking, it's you tailing me."

Indignation colored her cheeks. "I didn't follow you. I saw a flyer and thought it looked interesting, but you obviously read it, too. If I'd known you'd be here"—aggravation laced her hushed tone—"I'd never have shown up."

Her harsh words had me fisting my hands, or maybe it was how tempting the line of her neck looked, that column of tanned skin shifting as she swallowed. But she was right: having a diversion wouldn't help my plan. "Then we're on the same page."

"Excuse me?"

"Since we're both here for the contest, we can pretend that night never happened."

Her face fell, but a beat later, she said, "Good," nothing but ice in her voice.

I followed with "Great."

She spat, "Fine."

So much for stamping out the awkward.

Waiters began moving through the space, small measures of white wine poured into each glass. A reporter sat at the bar, snapping photos and taking notes.

"Besides," she added, "we won't have to worry about seeing each other once you're eliminated."

Hot, and cocky to boot. "You're right, we won't. You'll be gone by week two and won't get to congratulate me on my win."

The same competitive streak that had sparked between us at The Blue Door resurfaced, along with a punch of lust heading south. That night, we'd played drinking games, sipping wine and listing the notes dancing on our tongues. Then, at my place, I'd tasted them on her. A dribble in the hollow of her throat. A splash between her breasts. A dab of Cabernet on her pussy.

I almost groaned at the memory, but rustling at the front of the room saved me.

Alonzo Adriano had just introduced himself, and I hadn't even noticed him enter. He may have been a head shorter than my six foot two, his cufflinks and navy suit camouflaging him in this room of wannabes, but I should have been focused.

The group was rapt, hanging on the man's every syllable, and here I was, fantasizing about a woman.

Alonzo gave a brief rundown about his two brothers and their restaurants, his dark eyes intent as he gestured to the wall of wine bottles, extolling the beauty of their collection, reverence in his voice. At least the man was passionate.

A final contestant hurried into the room, the man's blond hair parted so severely, the edge of his scalp shone. He tightened his tie, distaste on his face as he judged my tattoos, but he slid into the chair opposite my dirty princess. Moisture beaded on his large forehead.

We sat in silence as a sign-in sheet was passed around. When it reached me, I didn't hesitate. I printed JIMMY LEON, using my mother's maiden name. If I'd written Giannopoulos, it wouldn't be long before Alonzo sussed out that his Offshoot Winery bottles came from my family vineyard, and this whole ruse would be shot to shit.

The dirty princess rolled her pen through her fingers, her gaze lingering on the page before she wrote RACHEL KATES. The letters were as neat and tidy as her appearance, but there was a wild woman beneath the surface. One I'd had grinding against my hips. My mind drifted back to that night again, to our sweaty bodies and her passionate cries, and my cock stirred.

Jesus. Next session, I'd need to find a seat away from her.

As she passed the page across the table, the latecomer made sure they brushed fingers. An obvious move. He thrust his hand toward her. "I'm Rufus. Looks like we'll be spending the next two months together"—he eyed the sheet—"*Rachel.*"

She sat straighter. "Looks like it."

Her hand slipped into his, and I barely refrained from slipping *my* arm around her shoulders. To claim her? To mark her as mine? The notion grated at me. A couple of women I'd been with frequented the dive bar where I worked. We'd have our night of fun, then I'd pour them drinks at Rudy's Tavern and we'd make small talk and go on like it had never

happened. Once and done. Here I was, jealous over some jerk with enough hair gel to lube a Slip 'N Slide.

His slicked blond head and three-piece suit were more her style anyway. Probably came with a lot less baggage, too.

Still, after their exchange, I couldn't resist leaning over and whispering in her ear. "You know, if you marry him, you won't be able to take his last name."

She shivered, then craned her neck to check the sheet as he got up to pass it to the next table. A laugh exploded from her, the same bark of a cackle she'd let loose at my place, like an asthma sufferer on laughing gas. Annoyed glances shot our way, but I chuckled.

"It is a *shitty* name," she whispered.

"Downright *crap*," I agreed.

Rufus *Colon* probably had a hell of a time in high school.

While the Colon chatted up the next table, the tension between Rachel and me ebbed. Keeping things friendly between us might be a better tactic than avoidance. Labelling her as off-limits would only jack up my desire. Plus, if we talked about our night together, it might stop occupying my headspace.

But when I said, "Did you send that picture to your boss? Is that why you're here?" she dropped her forehead to her hands. I winced. "Wrong thing to ask?"

Without moving her head, she said, "As far as I'm concerned, that photo never happened." She pushed to her feet and leaned into my space, her angry whisper puffing against my cheek. "Since I can't remember a single thing from that night, it's easy to believe, as long as you don't feel the pressing urge to bring it up. And yes, that photo is why I'm here. I lost my job because of it."

She dodged the tables, her heels punctuating each angry step toward the bathrooms, and I was left...uncomfortable. She didn't remember our night together? The sex on the floor? Or in my bed? Against the wall? I'd been reliving every glorious detail for weeks and she remembered *nothing*?

My necklace felt heavy, the cuff circling my wrist tight. I'd given that woman six orgasms and not one of them had left a mark. When I came up for air from between her legs that night, she'd grabbed my hair, pulled my face to hers and said, "You are a god. I don't know what you just did to me, but you better do it again."

So I did. With gusto.

And she didn't remember.

The knowledge chafed at me, worse than if she'd faked every *yes* and *more* and *don't stop*. She had no idea how good I'd made her feel. How hard she'd made me come.

I was pissed.

Alonzo collected the sign-in sheet and proceeded to place five bottles of white—Chardonnay, Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Sauvignon Blanc, and Pinot Grigio—in a line.

"Tonight," he said, "is an elimination round. A blind tasting to separate those who are serious about their wines from those who are here for the show. If you don't guess all five varietals correctly, you're out. No second chances. The rest of you will be invited back. Each Tuesday and Thursday for eight weeks, we'll test your skills: opening bottles, pouring wines, and table-service exercises. Each session will involve a blind tasting and an elimination. Those with the two lowest scores will be sent home each round. Are there any questions?"

As hands flew up, Rachel and the Colon slipped back into their seats. She sat perfectly composed. Too stiff to be natural. Although taking that photo had been funny as hell, and we'd had a blast taking it, she was obviously uncomfortable. I could understand her embarrassment. I hadn't done something that ridiculous since college.

"I won't mention it again," I said.

She stared dead ahead. "You just did."

"No, I didn't."

"And *again*."

“Are you high? I didn’t say a thing.”

A few people shushed us, a dirty look shot from the Colon, and she lowered her voice. “Actually, everything you’re *not* saying revolves around the one thing that’s banned from discussion. As far as I know, it was the worst sex of my life, and I’m here to listen to Mr. Adriano, *not you*.”

Worst sex? *Of her life?*

She may have been defensive about that photo, but she didn’t remember how she’d dared me to flash the entire street beforehand, or the kisses I’d trailed up her calves afterward, our laughter dissolving into breathy moans, all playfulness forgotten.

She didn’t remember a damn thing.

We sat beside each other, invisible bricks stacking between us. All I could do was review every detail from our night, and she was oblivious.

By the time the questions died down, all five glasses in front of us had been poured. The Colon sweated profusely. Rachel fidgeted beside me. I should have been calm; the tasting was a joke. Even my brother, with his underdeveloped palate, could discern a Riesling from a Chardonnay. It was child’s play. Except I was riled up, the only cures a long ride on my bike or a round with a punching bag.

I forced my focus on the wines. I knew each one by aroma alone.

Riesling: green apple, lime zest, a hint of petrol.

Sauvignon Blanc: asparagus, gooseberries, fresh cut grass.

The others were just as easy.

Rachel shifted and her skirt rode up, exposing her legs. Long legs. Sexy legs. Legs that had gripped my hips like iron.

When my grandfather first explained that the alcohol drips that clung to a wineglass were known as the wine’s legs, I’d giggled. When I got older, I understood how sexy that sweep of liquid was, tantalizing and teasing. Exactly like the distracting legs beside me.

I jammed a hand through my hair and diverted my attention to the posers around the room. Many were fumbling with their glasses, scratching out and rewriting their answers. It was laughable. Rachel paused on the Gewürztraminer, likely confusing it with the Riesling. If she got it wrong, we'd part ways and I'd never see her again. I'd get her out of my head once and for all. Eliminate any distractions. But the idea of her never knowing the feel of me inside her, when I could barely look at my bed without stroking myself, wasn't right.

When she wrote the correct answer, my relief shocked me in its intensity.

We were asked to swap pages, then Alonzo described each wine. The Colon, predictably, messed up the whole page. He scowled, and said, "*Shit.*" Rachel and I shared a laugh.

People stood, the room a mix of cocky smirks and dejected faces, at least half not invited back next week. Rachel exhaled, pleased with her success.

I wouldn't see her for five days, and if the past eleven were any indication, she'd occupy too many of my quiet minutes. She, on the other hand, probably wouldn't give me a second thought. Unaware what I was playing at, I wrapped an arm behind her chair, my breath close enough to skim her ear.

"Six," I said.

"What?" There was no hiding the tremor in her voice.

"Six. That's how many orgasms I gave you, Sunshine."

Her brown eyes widened then fell heavy. "There were only four condoms in the trash."

"You counted?"

"I *noticed*. And my name isn't Sunshine."

My first glimpse of her tonight was a reminder to keep my distance, her ability to unbalance me dangerous. But the contradiction of her wildness concealed below her measured appearance was too tempting. If she couldn't remember what had gone down between us, I'd have to remind her. "Sure it is, Sunshine. Unless you prefer Ray. And since we never formally

introduced ourselves, I'm Jimmy, and I don't need my cock to give a woman an orgasm."

Her breasts strained against her top, the fabric quivering with each inhale. My naughty ray of sunshine. I lingered for a beat, long enough to run my nose up her ear.

Then I took off, unsure what the hell I'd just started.

## CHAPTER SIX

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RACHEL

I was in serious trouble. I'd debated not returning for the second round of the contest, anything to avoid Jimmy and his *six orgasms*. Yet here I was, pacing in front of Crush, walking toward and away from the door at a dizzying pace.

When I saw him last week, the same vertigo had struck—the urge to turn and speed walk away—but I'd stood my ground. I wouldn't let one man, and one silly night, keep me from fulfilling my destiny, and this contest was *destined*. The more I played it over, the more convinced I'd become: the blackout and the shift in the air after making our wishes was the supernatural at work. A magical twist of fate. My father, probably tired of watching me flounder in career hell, must have arranged it.

Which meant I had to prove myself worthy, finally shed my stench of failure and stick to a rewarding career. My mother would help me financially if asked, but my father had paid his own way through college to become an electrical engineer and had worked hard to support us. I yearned to be strong, like him. Self-sufficient, like him. Maybe I'd even meet a nice guy in the class.

If Jimmy and his six orgasms didn't interfere.

Which meant I needed reinforcements. Gwen could read me like nobody's business and always called my bluffs, but Ainsley was my go-to for advice on how to ditch men.

She answered after three rings. “Men are assholes.”

“You and Gwen share that sentiment.” I wasn’t far behind. One particular asshole, who for sure lied about a certain number of orgasms, was likely awaiting my arrival.

“My client had me order this, like, over-the-top gift for his wife. Insane diamond necklace. Then he had me buy flowers for his mistress. Watching men like him cheat on their wives is enough to change the Pope’s views on marriage.” Ainsley didn’t mention her ex, Brandon, and how he’d have fit into that boys’ club, but her disdain embittered each word.

“Disgusting assholes,” I agreed.

“It pays the bills. But forget my drama, what’s up?”

I hugged my waist and focused on the motorcycle parked on the street. Smooth leather. Black trim. I’d always wanted to ride one, not on the back like I had with Gabe. Just me and the air in my face, so I could feel all that power buzzing up my arms. My mother, however, would swallow her tongue—which is also what would happen if she saw the man messing with my head. “I need boy advice.”

“Another date with a Mr. Potato Head lookalike?”

“No, thank God. Remember the guy from our birthday? The one with the tattoos?”

“Are you kidding? I still have dreams about him, of the sexy variety.”

“Yeah, well, turns out he’s in the sommelier contest, and he’s taunting me with memories of our night together. He’s probably full of it, but I’m not sure how to handle things.”

“You don’t want to handle *him*?”

If it were only that easy. When he’d acknowledged the Butt Crack Incident, humiliation had burned through me. Crawling into a hole (stocked with wine), never to be seen again, would have been preferable to sitting next to the man who’d witnessed that stunt. Except he *had* gone out of his way to change the topic and joke about the Colon’s name, easing my awkwardness.

He was also hot as sin. A lethal combination. “I have to see this guy every week, maybe for a couple of months. Just tell me how to turn him down so I don’t make it weird.”

She barely took a breath. “Tell him you have a boyfriend. That you broke up briefly, hence the hookup, but you got back together. If he takes it well, thank him for understanding. If he doesn’t, tell him the shitty sex made you realize how much you missed your man.”

And that’s why I called Ainsley. “You are a dating guru.”

“It’s a gift,” she said, and we hung up.

Pumped, I tugged down my blouse—black instead of white, my gray skirt a cinch to mix and match. (The beauty of the nine-piece ensemble!) A roll of my shoulders later, I marched into Crush, head high, determination propelling me forward. With half the group eliminated, the day’s tasting was in the cellar below. Wafts of wet stone hit me, followed by dark fruit and that earthy scent that clung to wine cellars. It smelled of nights organizing bottles with my dad.

Two long harvest tables filled the center of the stone room, three glass walls of wine surrounding them.

And Jimmy.

He sat in a far corner, on his own, one ankle hooked over his knee, the tilt of his shoulders the picture of effortless cool. The tattoos, those worn boots, that scruff just long enough to tickle, not scratch—the man oozed *dude*.

A dude who was intent upon me.

I clutched my purse against my hip, his potent gaze unrelenting. I reviewed Ainsley’s advice. *Boyfriend. Bad sex. Shut the man down.* All I could do was return his stare, my knees weakening by the second. Did his full lips taste as delicious as they looked? Had he growled when my nails bit into his ass? No memories replied. But he did.

Bad Boy held up six fingers.

Unbelievable.

I swiveled away, the humidity in the room descending between my breasts. Unlike Ainsley, I wasn't gifted with ample cleavage and burlesque curves. I was long-limbed and thin, no definition to my arms. Jimmy's rapt attention put the sexy in my step. I moved to the glass wall, my back to him, a sway to my hips that hadn't been there before. Like I was a thing to be admired. Like I could grip a stripper pole and blow the roof off a club.

A man had never made me feel so desirable with nothing but his eyes. But I was a relationship girl, and Jimmy was a bad, *bad* boy. I'd been down that road before.

He was also competition.

To quell the heat in my blood, I focused on the wall of bottles in front of me. The breadth of the collection was astounding, new and old world wines, each worth more than my savings. They even had a few bottles from Tamber Bey. I'd gnaw off my right arm to taste a drop of that Cabernet.

There were also a number of bottles I didn't recognize, enough that my confidence waned. At the first tasting, my nerves hadn't bested me. Discerning the whites poured was easy enough, and the hopefuls vying for the position were so varied my limited experience hadn't been a hindrance.

The stakes had changed.

In one quick move, Alonzo had eliminated over half the group, leaving only those with a nose for wine and the drive to win. I wasn't sure where I fell on the spectrum.

Sensing the room filling up, I turned to find a seat. Jimmy's attention had shifted from me to the wall of wines at the back, his steely eyes broody. Or maybe sad. I may not have remembered our night together, but the bleakness of his apartment was hard to forget. His forlorn expression now was difficult to ignore, too. The few seats around him were empty, the other contestants keeping their distance, scornful looks tossed his way. As though his tattoos were contagious.

At sixteen, I'd seen a Jane Goodall documentary and declared myself a future primatologist. I'd spend hours at the

zoo, staring at the chimpanzee enclosure, taking important notes: *Murphy smacked Daisy's head*. When I realized actual documentation involved rain forests and bugs the size of Texas, I aborted the plan, but not before befriending one chimpanzee. Sir Lancelot would spend his days hunched in a corner, his back turned to the world. My best friend, Elise, had just moved away, and the group we'd eaten lunch with decided my hair wasn't stylish enough or my shoes weren't hip enough. They left me to fend for myself. Sixteen-year-old super villains.

Sir Lancelot had understood me. I'd tell him about my crush on Ross Zuckerman, and he'd pick at his fur. The day he held out a branch toward me, I cried.

Jimmy might have oozed dude and sexual confidence, but there was no denying the loneliness beneath his tough exterior, and Ainsley's advice drifted toward the shadows. I could have sat in the empty chair near me, put an end to whatever game Jimmy and his *six orgasms* were playing, but watching life through a one-way mirror wasn't fun for anyone.

Before I could overthink my decision, I rounded the tables and sat next to him.

He crowded my space, his elbow brushing mine. "Couldn't stay away, could you?"

"I wanted a front row seat for your elimination."

He edged closer. "Hope you don't cry when you're cut, Sunshine. I don't deal well with criers."

Maybe I should have pondered my seat choice longer. But his use of that silly nickname amused me, our banter more fun than irritating. "I don't deal well with cocky men who talk to mask their incompetence."

"If you remembered our night, you'd know my cockiness is justified."

"If it were that good, I wouldn't have blocked it out." He was toying with me, using my memory lapse to get under my skin. So why was I smiling? Biting back my grin, I removed

two pens from my purse and set them perpendicular to the table's edge.

“Too much of a good thing can kick you into shock,” he said.

“Too much ego suffocates brain function.”

He leaned into my side. “It wasn't my brain that fucked you.”

Whoa. My witty reply dried up, all moisture heading south. Since our last meeting, zoning out had become habit. The memory of his nose in my hair after the tasting, his lips by my ear, the word *cock* whispered for only me to hear, had played on repeat. Each time, my irritation rose—frustration that I couldn't remember details of the night in question.

And Bad Boy knew it.

Time for a topic change. “The Nose looks like stiff competition.”

I nodded toward a contestant, but Jimmy's focus lingered on my face. He had deep blue eyes with hints of steel. Intense eyes. I liked the attention, enjoyed our flirtatious joking and our proximity, how his body heat mingled with mine. I liked it all too much.

Taking my cue, he searched out the Nose. I'd spotted him at the first round and his intimidation factor was still high. His navy vest and tie had country club written all over them, his gaunt cheeks and sharp chin debonair. His nose was the most worrisome. A nose that large and straight had the power to unlock scents from any glass.

Jimmy whistled. “That is one mighty schnoz.”

“*The Wizard of Schnoz*,” I said and cringed. My father and I had played this game, swapping words in movie titles, both of us cracking up. Men didn't often get my silly sense of humor.

Instead of raising an eyebrow, Jimmy played along. “*The Schnoz of Wrath*.”

“*Rebel without a Schnoz*.”

*“The Naked Schnoz.”*

I snorted. *“The Schnozinator.”*

He laughed then, a deep, rumbling sound that curled around me. My answering cackle wasn't as smooth. I clamped a hand over my mouth, and he gripped my thigh. “Don't hide that sound, Ray. Your laugh is a thing of beauty.”

And the way he said it? Ainsley's husky voice made every giggle rich and sexy. Gwen's humor tended toward the sarcastic, but her laughter was musical. My outbursts were unattractive. Then Jimmy touched my thigh, told me to embrace it, and a hazy calm trickled below my skin, as though I'd enjoyed a glass of wine.

Unfortunately, once Jimmy gripped my thigh, the bastard didn't let go. His fingers tightened, and my blood rushed, a steady throb congregating below my skirt. This wasn't the light buzz after a sip of wine. This was a shot of tequila, a lick of salt, and a splash of lime.

Feverish, I gripped my seat.

Alonzo walked down the stairs, and all chatter in the room vanished. Jimmy's hand stayed put, tingles radiating from that point of contact. I was a hormonal mess.

Alonzo, with his goatee and gold rings, had an air of hustler about him, but he commanded the room, outlining the hour ahead. Few words registered. Jimmy's hand inched up my thigh, and I shifted forward. I shouldn't have shifted. I should have slapped his hand away and blurted my boyfriend story. My traitorous body did nothing. His focus was on our host, his fingers dipping between my thighs. Not touching me where it counted, but so, *so* close.

A sudden memory flashed.

*Jimmy's weight on me. Deep thrusts. My legs gripping his waist.*

*A hard floor.*

*Teeth on skin.*

*Me screaming in pleasure.*

*Him whispering how beautiful I am.*

Holy God. My tailbone (and other parts) throbbed, the lingering bruise confirming the flashback's authenticity.

But Jimmy pulled his hand away.

My thighs burned, followed by an urge to grab his hand and shove it up my skirt.

What was happening to me? I was a professional. A competitor in need of a freaking job. Not some sex-crazed woman after a quickie.

Warmth persisted from his touch and that memory. When he leaned in to say, "Number one happened against my bedroom door," that heat turned molten.

The man wasn't playing fair.

We each had a glass of water, and I gulped half of mine, catching Jimmy's smirk from the corner of my eye. Seriously unfair. That level of flirtation implied he was after a second round. Not altogether unappealing.

But if I let that happen, I couldn't pass out this time. I'd make sure I was wide awake for the entire show, which meant the aftermath would reach new heights of awkward. My no-strings, no-names rule would be toast. Twice a week we'd be in each other's faces, my current level of distraction amplified.

Bad idea.

I focused on the tasks at hand. A bottle of wine and corkscrew were placed in front of each contestant. Three judges made the rounds, marking our ability to open a bottle. The Nose cut his foil in one smooth move, the cork popping out in a clean stroke. Jimmy also made it look effortless, his wrists loose as he maneuvered the lever.

I fumbled.

I'd opened hundreds of bottles, usually with my dad's corkscrew, but I should have aced the test. Instead it took two swipes for the foil to come off, and I missed the center of the cork. Too many people were watching me—judging, wishing

my failure. Performing under pressure was my kryptonite, a reason the jobs I'd burned through never involved crowds.

I fisted my hands on my lap, unsure what had made me think I could pull this off. Even if, by some miracle, I won, the position gained would be nothing but pressure and the spotlight, the event splashed across local papers, real sommeliers calling it a joke. How would I manage?

"Why doesn't Alonzo just do one day of tastings to choose the winner?" Dragging out this torture was unappealing, the possibility of my birthday wish never coming true making it all the worse.

"They need the publicity," Jimmy said. "They want to play it up. He'll only cut a couple people each session. Give the papers something to write about. And don't worry, a few on the far table messed up worse than you."

"*Worse* than me? Is that your way of making me feel better?"

He closed the distance between us again. His breath teased my cheek. "Number two was with you on the edge of my bed. I was kneeling on the floor with your legs over my shoulders. If you want me to make you feel better, all you have to do is ask."

Stop the presses. Bronze this moment. Bottle this bubble of time.

I brushed off last week's comment about him not needing his "cock" to please a woman. I knew my body, knew what it could and couldn't feel, and he was toying with me. But if he was truthful, if number two happened with him on his knees, that meant I came from oral. From him *eating my pussy* as Gwen would have said.

The impossible achieved.

I'd knocked one of my pens askew when opening the bottle, so I repositioned it. A small corner of order I could keep. "I don't believe you."

He squinted at me. "You're questioning my skill?"

“No. I’m sure you’re plenty skilled, but that’s never happened for me.”

The contestants were chatting as our blind tasting was poured—a study of Pinot Noir in five glasses. My grape, thankfully. A chance to redeem myself. But instead of focusing on the wines I’d have to guess, I was sharing my sexual dysfunction with the man I should have been avoiding. And I wasn’t even drunk.

“Are you shitting me?” he asked, incredulous. “You rode my face like it was your job.”

That visual had me clenching *everywhere*. Could he be telling the truth? Had my body unraveled under his tongue? “I don’t lie. Not well, at least. *You* clearly have no problem telling tales.”

I tried not to glance his way, but he leaned forward, forcing the connection. His dark hair fell across his forehead. Hair I’d probably tugged in the throes of passion.

Glee shone in his eyes. “There’s only one way to find out.”

“Not happening.” But I so wanted it to. To know once and for all if my frigidness in that position was my headspace, the man’s inexperience, or a general lack of connection.

Since my father had passed away, and the whole Gabe fiasco, I’d always dated the “right” guys—boys with my mother’s stamp of approval, similar upbringing making conversation easy and family dinners nice. The word *love* had been used, and I’d been happy, but passion had never played a role. Not even with Gabe. Touching his tattooed arms and wearing his leather jacket had made me feel wicked and wild, something I’d craved, but lust had never spurred my pulse.

My reaction to Bad Boy was lust with a side of longing and a dash of need.

“Your blush says you’d like to find out if I’m lying.” He had no qualms calling me on the heat his presence stirred. Or goading me. “Don’t fuck up the Pinot tasting. Flustering you is too much fun.”

Such a jokester. “Pinot is my grape.”

“I thought you were a Cabernet Sauvignon lover. You nearly fainted when I poured you the Screaming Eagle. Even plastered yourself against the bottle.”

I flipped toward him and gripped his thigh. “Are you serious? You opened a Screaming Eagle? And I drank it?”

He chuckled, something different in his steely gaze. Not the sexy droop of his eyelids that had me wanting to nibble his neck, or the glazed sadness I’d seen. This was a sparkle, adoration behind the subtle glow. “You did. And unless you want the room to see how much you turn me on, I’d suggest releasing my leg.”

We were sequestered, no one beside me or across the table to eavesdrop, but I snatched my hand back. “I can’t believe I tasted a Screaming Eagle and don’t remember. That’s criminal.”

“You loved it, if that helps.” He lowered his voice, a quiet rumble just for me. “I think you liked it best when I poured a drop on your pussy before I ate you out.”

What? *Whatwhatwhat?* It was all too much. Missing that wine, my possible orgasm with those full lips between my thighs. *That wine.* The knowledge of what I’d missed was worse than the Butt Crack Incident.

I turned toward him and hissed, “This conversation ends now. We’re in a room with other people, and I need to focus. Keep the P-word to yourself.”

He mumbled something about me having no issues shouting pussy in Vesper, and I cursed Reckless Rachel for the thousandth time.

I forced my attention to our tasting. Five glasses of Pinot Noir faced me, my pens neatly lined up. A paper with five numbers listed in rows awaited my answers. My phone buzzed, stopped, then buzzed again. For sure my mother. I ignored the noise, but Jimmy frowned at my purse, then he snatched one of my pens.

I gawked at him. “That’s mine.”

“You have two.”

“In case one runs out of ink.”

“You need to write down five names. What kind of crappy pens run out of ink after five names?”

I gritted my teeth. My phone buzzed again, him and that noise equally as grating. He also didn't return the pen. Not only did he not return it, but he placed his index finger at the base of my other one and tapped it out of position. I moved it back perpendicular. He tapped it again.

Motherfucker.

I dug my fingers into his side and pinched. “Next time I go for the nipple. Don't mess with me.”

“Is that a promise or a threat?”

Probably both. My phone vibrated again, my mother never one to trust voicemail. (What if you're abducted and can't get to the phone? What if you've had a seizure?) Unable to add her to my stress, I reached in and silenced my cell. To afford participating in this contest, I'd taken a receptionist job at my gym. So unless I wanted to fold towels for a living, it was time to get my head in the game.

I plucked my remaining pen from the table, took a deep breath, and swirled the first glass. From nothing but a sniff and sip we had to name the region, extra points awarded for the winery and year.

My father had belonged to a wine club. Once I'd shown interest, he brought me along to tastings. Some were lateral, where we'd compare one wine across vintages. Others compared grape varieties. When I got them right, he'd hold up my sheet and boast about it to the room, then we'd talk wine the whole drive home. Hopefully those nights had left their mark.

The Nose already had his schnozinator in his glass, no doubt picking up every nuance. Jimmy was in no rush, swirling and sniffing. I steadied my hand, lifted my glass, and inhaled.

*Black cherry.* That was a given for most Pinots. I mentally reviewed the classes I'd taken, searching for the characteristics

that defined each region. Dark plum for New Zealand, cranberry and earth for Oregon, and the subtle barnyard aroma from France. I sipped and swirled and inhaled, narrowing the possibilities. Guessing the years would be harder, the wineries a shot in the dark. Good thing I'd pored over Crush's wine list the past week.

As I lifted my second glass again, Jimmy whispered, "Number three happened on my living room floor. After the butt shot."

My wine nearly sloshed on the table.

Us. Naked. On his floor. *After* the butt shot he wasn't supposed to mention. But I didn't even care. That must have been the memory that resurfaced, and I wanted to disappear in those sensations again—us rocking together, skin against skin.

If we'd been alone, no test or audience around, I'd have given up my charade. I'd have straddled him on that chair, ground against him and eased the ache building under my skirt. *Passion. Lust. Cravings.* Things I'd never experienced lit under my skin in a tantalizing cocktail. But we had an audience, and I had a test to ace.

The rest went relatively smoothly. Except for the moments Jimmy leaned over to list how orgasms four, five, and six had gone down—in his kitchen, the last two between his sheets. *God have mercy.* Wines four and five gave me trouble, but by the time my final answers were on the page, I was pleased.

The Nose folded his arms, smug as hell. Jimmy took his time.

He tapped *my* pen on the table, his bedroom eyes back on me, my skirt ready to combust. "You think you did well?" he asked.

I sat straighter, hiding my answers. "Do you doubt my ability?"

"I don't doubt you. The real question is, do you still doubt *me*? Do I need to prove I can make you scream my name with a lick of my tongue?"

Bad Boy didn't mince words, and I liked it—his dangerous air, his confidence. He had me rethinking my stance on one-night stands. Or *two-night* stands. My awkwardness with him had receded, jokes and flirtations in its place. He had me at ease. Yes, I wanted a relationship and he wouldn't be that man, but for the first time ever, I felt as though I could pull off a fling.

May as well strike while the iron was hot. "If you pass this session," I said, my determination building, "I might consider testing your claim. For scientific reasons."

His tongue stroked his bottom lip, leaving it wet and red and kissable. "Then I better get this last wine right."

He'd better.

Unlike me, who'd moved back and forth between my five wines, comparing and questioning and driving myself nuts, he'd sipped each in turn, leisurely. He was as contemplative with his final Pinot. The contrast of his strong hands, the chunky ring on his middle finger, and the leather cuff as he swirled his glass was strangely sensual. Those hands would look downright brutish on my freckled skin.

He observed the alcohol clinging to the crystal, assessing the legs that dripped downward. His focus was absolute. Then he brought the rim to his nose, inhaled...

And something changed.

His brows pulled tight, a deep crease sinking between them. The sip that followed sent a symphony of expressions across his face—jaw flexing, cheeks reddening, lips flattening into a grim line. His blue-gray eyes glazed. He plunked his glass down and pushed it aside, as though it were tainted, corked. Gone was the relaxed toss of his posture. Now he was all straight spine and crossed arms. His flirty glances ceased, too.

Nothing about wine five struck me as odd. It was a local California Pinot Noir, of that I was sure, but I couldn't peg the winery. Unsure what soured him, I didn't intrude. Aside from a hot night I barely recalled, and some flirting, we hardly knew

each other. His scowl didn't invite questions, his sudden chill frosting my mood further.

Alonzo returned, but I barely listened as he explained the day's results would be emailed. Bitterness pulsed off Jimmy. He wouldn't glance my way and didn't make a joke when the Nose sneezed. I'd gone from unable to shake him to invisible. It shouldn't have hurt; he didn't owe me anything. But the emotional whiplash was jarring.

The second we were dismissed, he was up and out of his chair, his boots *thunking* toward the stairs, not a word to me. Like the flirting had never happened. Like he hadn't teased me all session with sensual promises, only to leave me wanting. I snatched my purse and pens and hurried after him. If nothing else, I wanted to grab his shirt and yank him around and ask what his problem was, but he was too quick. I made it outside as he straddled the motorcycle, *of course*, revved the engine, and tore off. Bad Boy with an attitude.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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JIMMY

I'm not sure when I became such a dick. Maybe when my family ripped the ground out from under my feet. It could have been when Sophia left me. All I knew was a sweet woman, who'd been honest about her sexual desires and awkwardness, had gotten caught in the crossfire. And it wasn't cool.

I'd clocked a lot of miles on my bike since our last session at Crush, pounded a punching bag within an inch of its life. My family's Pinot Noir still lingered on my tongue. It tasted of nights watching my grandfather bottle wine and days helping pick grapes. It tasted of deception.

One sip had sent me for a spin.

The other thing that had my knuckles raw from rounds of pummeling a speed ball was the hurt on Rachel's face when I blew her off. The woman who'd made me laugh, who matched my sarcasm blow for blow, didn't deserve to be toyed with. She didn't warrant my attitude. She was all long lines and soft skin, a little innocent and a lot of fun. All either of us wanted was another night, and I couldn't even manage that.

But I could muster an apology.

I got to our next session early and waited, knee bouncing, fists clenching, hoping to see her. If she'd been eliminated, I'd have no way to get in touch. I'd have to live with the tightness in my chest. With a second to spare, she waltzed in, and I

relaxed. She sat on the far side of the room, stoic. She didn't spare me a glance. I deserved as much, and worse. All I could do was stare, guilt and frustration coiling.

We had to uncork Champagne, a tough feat for the uninitiated, and she struggled. If I were beside her, I'd have whispered some tricks. *Angle the bottle at forty-five degrees. Rotate the bottle, not the cork.* The blind tasting afterward was a sampling of Merlot, easy for me, but I watched her, apprehensive, worried she'd get cut. That I'd lose my chance to explain.

It was over too soon.

As Alonzo thanked us for coming, the man beside Rachel—his forehead as shiny as his dark hair—leaned into her side. He whispered to her and touched her elbow. He got as close as I had last week. She smiled at him, her nose crinkling in amusement.

Jealousy flashed behind my eyes. I wanted to capture that sunny smile. Bask in it. Hear her silly laugh, because it was *real*. As were her orgasms when I'd gone down on her. Knowing I'd been the only man to make her buck and moan with my tongue was a thrill. It made me want to pound my chest and growl, prove only I could reduce her to incoherent sounds.

The whole thing was a mess. I wanted her. For more than one night, maybe, but I'd already proven I wasn't ready for a girl like Rachel. Where did that leave us?

Alonzo scrubbed his goatee as he addressed the room, his blue suit more mobster than restaurateur. "Like last time, emails will be sent with results, and two of you will be cut. Next session will be Cabernet Sauvignon. Since our numbers are still high, four will be eliminated." He nodded. "Until next week."

My gaze cut to Rachel, who went white as a sheet. The night we'd hooked up, and I uncorked the Screaming Eagle, she'd lamented her challenge with Cabs, complaining that she'd always struggled tasting the grape. She wouldn't remember that confession, but there was no denying the worry

in her pinched brow. Another four lost would take us down to twenty-two. She wasn't sure she'd last.

Which meant my time with her could be limited.

She was up and at the stairs as I reached for my jacket, but a tap on my shoulder stopped me from following her. "Have we met before?"

I turned and searched the woman's face. She had blond hair and narrow features, excessive makeup highlighting her blue eyes. Nothing about her was familiar. "Don't think so."

She studied me. "I just thought we'd met—at an event or something. I'm April. I pour wines for functions in Napa."

The odds of her remembering me from an Offshoot Winery tasting were slim. Back then my hair was clipped short, my face clean shaven. I had no tattoos, not a thread loose on my jeans. The prospect of being recognized wasn't pleasant. If Alonzo found out who I was, he'd plaster my name through the papers to up his publicity, and my plan would fall apart.

"Don't think we've met," I repeated. "I just moved to town. Must have a twin around."

Her pink lips turned down, but she didn't push.

I grabbed my jacket and spun for the exit, but my sights snagged on an Offshoot wine bottle. Our Cabernet, of course. Nothing but lies in sleek packaging.

My mind tripped back to the day my younger brother Dimitri and I caught our winemaker playing with our flagship Cabernet Sauvignon, blending in more than the twenty-five percent of other varietals allowed. We'd been on him to trim costs. His brilliant solution: pass off inferior—*cheaper*—grapes as Cabernet.

Dimitri had always been lazy, more corners cut than followed, and he didn't bat an eye. I, on the other hand, was furious, could never have my name linked to such deceit. My father's reaction was to list wine's illustrious history, telling us of Pliny the Elder's claims that most wines were adulterated, falsehoods wrapped in scents of black cherry and spice.

Neither of them gave a damn.

I'd sure as shit cared, but I lost the winery before I could make things right.

Now it was time. I was stuck in a rut, that lie tethering me to my past, and this contest was my best shot. Placing an anonymous call wouldn't work. Laws weren't as strict in Napa Valley as they were in Europe, and Dimitri had too many wine critics in his pocket. With the top experts in the field present at the final round, I'd work the tables, plant seeds and watch the gossip spark. The fire would catch before Dimitri could control it. They'd be forced to recall all mislabeled wines, and their reputation would nose-dive. It was unavoidable.

It was also tragic.

The winery my grandfather and I had poured our lives into would crumble, his legacy forever tarnished. My gut hollowed at the thought.

Ignoring the queasiness, I made for the door, hoping to find Rachel and clear my head. Luck was on my side. She'd stopped a few blocks down to rummage through her purse. Probably for her cell. Last session it had vibrated incessantly until she'd shut it off. A guy calling her, maybe. Someone in her life who didn't spin hot and cold. That didn't seem like her style, to flirt with me and go home to someone else, but if my ex Sophia taught me anything, it was people weren't always who they seemed.

I glanced at my bike and debated leaving, not pursuing her pull. Not offering some weak explanation for my behavior. That would mean sitting through another session, waiting for a glance from Rachel. A twitch of her lips. Any reaction to me.

Fuck it all to hell.

She was on the move and turned into a grocery store. I jogged after her, unsure what I was after, unable to stop.

I found her in the produce section. A bag of cherries was in the basket on her arm. Her hips swayed in her black skirt, the folds of her white blouse whispering across her skin as she moved. She always wore conservative clothes, always black,

white, or gray. I couldn't be sure who the real Rachel was—the woman with the witty humor, sexual appetite, and wild laugh, or the woman who wore prim outfits, straightened her pens, and couldn't come with any *other* man's head between her thighs. If I had to guess, I'd say she didn't know her true self, either.

Her back was to me as I approached, her attention fixed on an employee. “Do you have black currants?”

He scratched his pock-marked cheek. “Only dried, I think. Aisle three, with the bulk foods.”

“And licorice? The real kind, black. Not the strawberry Twizzlers.”

“Aisle two, with the candy. Should be there.”

Cherries in her basket, currants and licorice—she either had some odd eating habits, or she was training her nose for the Cabernet Sauvignon tasting.

“You don't want licorice,” I said.

Her shoulders jumped. She swiveled, surprise in her wide brown eyes. Her attention lingered on my leather jacket and dipped down the front of my T-shirt, landing on my belt buckle. Her eyes flicked up to my face, irritation replacing her desire. I saw it, though—the quickening of her breath, the parting of her lips. All wasn't lost.

“If I asked for licorice,” she said, “then I want licorice.”

“Not if you're using it to prepare for next class. For that, you need star anise and these.” I grabbed a pint of blackberries and tossed them in her basket.

Her scowl was adorable. “What do you think you're doing?”

“Helping you.”

The pink tinge on her chest rushed to her cheeks, indignation in her hitched shoulders. “I don't want your help, Jimmy. Since you need it spelled out, I don't want anything to do with you. I don't know what you're playing at, but this cat-and-mouse game doesn't do it for me.” She grabbed the

blackberries and shoved them at my chest. “Keep your hands out of my basket.”

Except I wanted my hands *in* her basket, my fingers smudging her refined edges. I returned the blackberries to her bin and smirked.

She huffed. “You’re incorrigible.”

“I’m determined. I need to explain about last session.”

She stepped to the side, hand on the berries to return them herself, and my heart stopped. No, not stopped. It lurched against my ribs, the muscle nothing but a giant bruise.

*Sophia.*

She was a few feet away—the woman who’d used me, chewed me up, and spat me out. The woman I hadn’t seen in two fucking years. Her blond hair was shorter, no longer to her waist, but her lips still shone red, her ample curves emphasized in a tight red dress. The dress we’d bought together in Greece. That was also where I’d purchased the engagement ring she’d refused. I stumbled back, history and memories slamming into my chest.

What a goddamn week. First the blind Pinot Noir tasting, a sip of my family’s wine secreted onto my tongue. Now Sophia.

Rachel appeared in front of me and placed her hand on the center my chest. My heart nearly leapt into her palm. “You okay?” she asked.

Our first round in the cellar, the same sympathy had softened her face. Right before she’d marched over and sat beside me. Her position now blocked Sophia from my view, and bitterness redirected my shock. “My ex is here, and I haven’t seen her in a couple years.”

Instead of removing her hand, she flattened her palm. “I’m guessing the relationship didn’t end well?”

Understatement of the century. “If her turning down my proposal constitutes not well, then yes, I’d agree.”

She glanced over her shoulder, still touching me. “The blond?”

I grunted, pulled between preserving Rachel’s closeness and getting the hell out of Dodge. I chose immobility.

And maybe Sophia’s appearance was a gift. A way to bury our past and, more important, a way to get Rachel alone. Convince her to hear me out. Plus, she could use my help. I placed my hand over hers, locking her palm against my chest. “I need a favor.”

She flexed her fingers, and her nails bit through my shirt. “A favor because you spent an hour flirting with me, then blew me off?”

That hurt almost as much as seeing Sophia. “I want to explain that, and I’d like to show my ex, Sophia, I’ve moved on. If you play along, I’ll come clean about my shitty behavior and help you with the Cab tasting.”

She stiffened, frustration in the set of her jaw. Unsure if I’d made headway, I added, “Were you planning on tossing a green pepper in your basket? You can’t study Cabernet Sauvignon without it.”

Her gaze darted from the green pepper display to her basket, then back to my face. Her hand relaxed under mine. “You have a deal. But only because I need to nail that tasting.”

“Of course,” I said. Except she wanted to nail me, too. She’d admitted as much last session.

Not wanting to give her a moment to rethink, I placed her basket by our feet and wrapped my other arm around her waist, pulling her against me. “This okay?”

She pressed her breasts to my chest, a soft sigh puffing against my cheek. “Yeah, okay.”

I was more than okay. I should have been a mess, the acid left in Sophia’s wake still eating at me, but Rachel dulled the ache. She also revved my libido, my cock thickening at the contact. Sophia was examining broccoli, filling her cart, working our way. I focused on Rachel, the freckles dotting her cheek, the silkiness of her blouse under my grip. I brushed my

lips over her jaw. Then I stole a taste, just below her ear, savoring the feel of her. She all but melted.

The woman wanted to nail me, all right, and the feeling was mutual.

A thousand emotions should have been warring, Sophia's reappearance something I'd dreaded, but I could only focus on one: craving. Desire for Rachel. We were in a public place, kids hanging off grocery carts, men and women ticking through their shopping lists, but Rachel's hips were pressed to mine. Her hair tangled with the scruff on my cheek, need in her breathy sounds. My resentment toward Sophia was still palpable, but holding Rachel close dimmed my turmoil.

Unwilling to let the moment pass, I whispered, "Your place or mine."

Her hips pulled back. "Mine. But only for the tasting."

She was full of it, intent on denying our attraction. Not that I blamed her. After the stunt I pulled, I was lucky she hadn't kneed me in the balls. I opened my mouth to say as much, when Sophia passed my field of vision. It was now or never.

I gripped Rachel tighter, pulling her into my side. "Sophia?"

Sophia went rigid at my voice. She glanced at me, then away, then back again. Her mouth opened in shock. "Jimmy? Is that *you*?"

My transformation the past two years had been gradual. For me, at least. My hair growing longer, the first tattoo, the second, the nipple piercings—parts of myself I hadn't realized I'd denied. Growing up, all I'd ever wanted was my father's approval. I'd spend extra hours picking grapes, wave my report card in his face, date the right girls.

Until Sophia. I gave up everything for her, and she threw it in my face.

Here I was, a stronger version of myself in some ways. An asshole, maybe, something I needed to fix, but my confidence had grown. I may not have looked the part of the former heir to one of Napa's most successful wineries, but I was finally

me. I liked sex a little rough. I dug the burn of a tattoo gun digging into my skin, the sharp stab of a piercing needle. Sticking a tight turn on my Harley was a thrill. All these things I'd kept in the shadows were visible to the world, and Sophia barely recognized me.

"It's been a while," I said. "Thought you'd moved to New York."

Her mouth still hung open, until she shook her head. "Jesus, Jimmy. What happened to you?"

*There.* Right there. That was when the hurt and betrayal resurfaced. Like she thought losing her had pushed me into a downward spiral. It had, for a while. No use denying that. As had my family's actions. Until I stopped running on that hamster wheel. What she saw in front of her was the man I was supposed to be.

Dangerous? Maybe.

Pissed off at the world? Probably.

Someone who only relied on himself? Definitely.

Neither of us knew the other all that well in the end.

Rachel slid one hand into my back pocket, the other brushing my abs, just above my belt. "You must be Sophia. Jimmy's told me a lot about you, and honestly, I'm so thankful you were brave enough to do what Jimmy couldn't."

"Excuse me?" Sophia curled her lip, a tic of hers I'd always hated.

"The proposal? Turning him down when neither of you wanted to take that step? We're both grateful." Rachel tilted her head and gazed up at me, locking me in her orbit. Her eyes were often expressive, indignation or excitement played out in shades of brown. Right now all I could see was *love*. My heart was pounding again, a syncopated rhythm, unfamiliar in its urgency, and I nearly crushed my mouth to hers.

Damn, was she good.

"Well, glad to see you're happy." The distaste as Sophia sneered at my new style said otherwise. She held up her left

hand. “I got married six months ago. Rocco and I moved back to the area.”

Rocco put quite the *rock* on Sophia’s finger, but the jealousy I expected wasn’t there. No sting of longing. No urge to claim her, like when that guy had leaned into Rachel. Sophia had only ever wanted one thing from me, and when I’d lost that, she went digging for gold elsewhere. I was still pissed. Still wanted to scream and tell her she was nothing but a conniving bitch. That what she did had twisted my heart. But creating a scene wouldn’t be cool with our audience, and Rachel’s arms made the whole fiasco easier to bear.

“Congratulations,” I offered instead. “Like Rachel said, thanks for what you did. Everything worked out for the best.”

An insincere smile flitted across her face, then she moved on, a sway to her hips I used to love. Time healed some wounds.

Rachel pushed away from me, all looks of love gone. “Let’s get shopping.”

We grabbed spices, fruits, vegetables, and a few bottles of Cabernet Sauvignon, no physical contact between us, my mind spinning the whole while. Each time it returned to Sophia, I clamped my jaw and switched tracks. Without Rachel pressed against me, my spite resurfaced.

I never let myself think about Sophia. She’d used me, fucked me over, and I’d fallen for her crap. Suppressing my thoughts was survival, pure and simple.

Then there was Rachel. The adoration on her face before, although an act, buffed the hard edges I’d sharpened the past two years. I was happy on my own, had promised myself I’d never fall in love again. Leave no one to derail my life but me. Still, *that look*. I could live without my family, get along without the winery, but around her, my heart suddenly craved more.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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RACHEL

I must have been a glutton for punishment. The whole hour at Crush had been an Olympic effort to avoid Jimmy’s persistent gaze. My attention would slide over, and I’d force it away. I’d catch sight of his hand dragging through his disheveled hair, and my mouth would water. I’d recall his descriptions of orgasms one through six, and I’d cross my legs. *Tightly*. As soon as our time had been up, I’d lurched out of my seat, only to be leading him into my apartment now.

The space had never felt so small.

Or smelled so good. The air around him was rich with scents of leather and musk, his hair tousled from his motorcycle helmet. His attention was everywhere. On the walls, lingering on the motivational sayings I’d hung, examining my tidy recycling bin, the books organized by color above my desk. Probably judging the pillow at the head of my bed embroidered with the quote, “*All our dreams can come true if we have the courage to pursue them.*” ~ Walt Disney.

Even under his scrutiny, dealing with him in my place was preferable to returning to where my supposed orgasms occurred.

I unpacked our groceries—wine, fruits, vegetables, spices—my hands busy, my heartbeat erratic, my eyes unable to meet his. That’s how it had been since our little acting scene.

I'd never been a drama geek. Standing on stage in front of people resulted in hot flashes, cold sweats, and more words forgotten than remembered. Even earlier, popping a champagne cork, something I'd done numerous times (Ainsley liked her mimosas), had me all thumbs. Because I'd had an audience. Not so with Sophia. For a spell, when Jimmy first spotted her, he'd turned ashen, devastation in the hollow below his eyes. A need to ease his pain had possessed me, and I deserved an Academy Award for my performance: Best Actress in an Awkward Grocery Store Scene.

Problem was, I was having trouble shaking the role.

He tossed his jacket on a stool and whistled at my wine fridge, appreciation in the extended note. "Nice collection."

"Thanks." I didn't glance up, didn't know what to do with the sight of him in my ordered apartment, all that danger and chaos tied into a delicious package. One I hungered to consume. I washed the fruit and put the blackberries in a bowl, the green pepper on a plate. I lined up the black peppercorns and star anise and chocolate, keeping occupied.

When I wiped the counter for a third time, he gripped my wrist. "Rachel."

*God*, his touch. I closed my eyes and exhaled.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Last time, at the end of the Pinot Noir tasting, I was a dick."

"You were." The apology diluted the tension between us, an acknowledgment I needed to hear. Still, I kept my focus on a small bruise on the green pepper. "Do I get an explanation?"

"When you look at me, you will."

So darn bossy.

He was on the opposite side of the island, his strong fingers circling my wrist, and I allowed myself a *glance*. A closer perusal of his ink. Tattoos began above his leather cuff, a swirling mass of ivy and swooping shapes in black and gray. The lines curled around a goblet on his forearm, a horned goat bleating on the inside of his bicep, a prowling panther clawing up from the outside of his elbow. Its head was hidden by the

frayed edge of his gray T-shirt, the same one he'd worn the first day of the contest. It read *Dare Me*.

Boy, did I want to dare him. Beg him to leap over the counter and rip open my blouse. To prove he could undo me with nothing but his tongue. Dare him to make me scream.

Instead I said, "I'm looking."

His thumb moved to my pulse point, pressing gently. "That you are." He held us together like that, our eyes searching, his thumb eavesdropping on my restless heart.

Then he released me and slung his leg over the counter stool. "My family owns a winery in the valley, and my father decided to retire—travel and spend time with my mom—which meant passing the business to me and my younger brother, Dimitri." He scrubbed his hands down his unshaven cheeks. "Except my father and I had a falling out, and I was cut off. Everything went to Dimitri. I haven't spoken to my family in almost two years, haven't sipped a drop of our—*their* wine since then."

He spoke evenly, but the usual gravel in his voice roughened. The gray in his blue eyes darkened.

"Until the blind tasting?" I asked. "The fifth glass of Pinot Noir?"

"It was the first time I'd tasted the wine in two years."

I thought back to the exercise. *Offshoot Winery*. It was an impressive operation, large scale. If I had the chance to run a place like that, I'd plaster myself to the helm and never let go. The revelation also meant Gwen's intel the night the girls had coaxed me into The Blue Door was accurate. Her sales pitch had involved the bartender's approval—the fact that he'd vouched for Jimmy and said Bad Boy came from a good family who owned a winery *or something*. When flirting around our bet that night, I first asked Jimmy to wager a vineyard. He'd laughed off my joke, and I'd assumed Cameron's information was more "or something" than fact. Apparently I was wrong.

“That’s why you shut down,” I said, more pieces of Jimmy fitting into place. “I’m sorry. It must have been a shock.”

“It was, and that makes two unwelcome surprises in a week, one of which you helped me face, so don’t apologize. My only regret is how I treated you.” He picked up my corkscrew and flipped it between his fingers.

“Inhaling your bike exhaust as you peeled off *was* unpleasant.” As was the hurt that lingered.

The corkscrew froze mid-flip. He frowned. “I was an asshole and it won’t happen again. I’d like to pick up where we left off.”

Fifty percent bad boy, fifty percent smooth talker. “The part where I outperform you in the contest?”

A smirk eclipsed his scowl. He placed the corkscrew down, pushed to his feet, and prowled around the counter. My apartment was nothing but a uniform square. Kitchen, countertop, and stools in one corner, a king bed with my Ikea closet behind the headboard opposite; across were a couch, coffee table, and TV, my desk and book shelves finishing off the geometric shape. It was ordered. Precise. It was everything I tried to emulate, the details never quite in my grasp.

Jimmy threw it all askew.

Each *thunk* of his boots echoed in my belly. I gripped the edge of the sink, the cool stainless steel a contrast to the heat building below my ribs. He stopped at my back, a whisper of his body brushing mine. “I prefer the part where you wanted to perform a scientific study with my head between your legs.”

His voice deepened, more gravel invading his tone, and my knuckles whitened on the counter. Need pulsed through me. I could have leaned back, just a millimeter, until the hard planes of his body pressed to mine, but I had a sneaking suspicion a simple touch wouldn’t be enough.

Our one wild night wasn’t my *modus operandi*. I was a relationship girl, mornings cuddling in bed and dinners out what I craved. Jimmy was trouble, and I was desperately attracted to him, in an unfamiliar way. Animalistic, almost.

Every time he raked his hair—untidy waves that hung shaggy over his forehead, cresting the tips of his ears, brushing the base of his neck—I wanted to grip the dark strands and pull his head between my thighs, find out if he was all talk, once and for all. Or sit on his face. Either would work.

But playing girlfriend to make his ex jealous had changed things. As did learning about his past. A woman he loved enough to marry, gone. A family lost. His future career pulled from him. Ferment those ingredients together and you'd get vinegar, not wine. Something told me he was more fruit than acid, and one sip would lead to two, until tasting wouldn't be enough. I would end up wanting more. *Relationship* more. Nothing about him fit into my world.

“I'm not sure about that particular study,” I said. “I've heard the side effects can be hazardous. Let's stick to our deal. I helped with Sophia, now you help with my tasting.”

He hovered at my back, his hot breath caressing my hair. Then he stepped away. “Tasting it is.”

We set up on my couch, and I stuffed a pillow between us, the lilac silk comical next to his roughness. But I needed space. He was here for one reason and one reason only: to help me pass our next test. Since I'd botched most of the service exercises, the tastings were my clincher. If I messed those up, I'd be back at my computer, searching for jobs, having to explain my umpteenth failure to my family. Thanks, but no thanks.

I sat with my back straight and legs crossed. Jimmy draped himself over my gray couch, his long legs sprawled apart. He tossed his arm behind me, resting his hand precariously close to my neck. It reminded me of The Blue Door, how he'd distracted me from my tasting. Come to think of it, maybe he was undermining me again. Using his manly wiles to mess with my game. “Is this a ploy?”

“Yes.” He didn't miss a beat.

“Seriously?”

“Did you want me to lie?”

“But we have a deal.”

“I’m holding up my end, Sunshine.”

That nickname vacillated between sweet and claw-his-eyes-out, this particular rendition landing on vexing. “So you expect me to do a tasting with you when you’ve admitted you plan to feed me false information.”

“I have planned no such thing.”

“You just *said* it’s a ploy.”

“Because it is. To make you reconsider joining me for your scientific study.” The Pot Stirrer ran a finger through my hair, the edge of his nail dragging behind my ear. Goose bumps erupted in its wake.

I smacked his hand away. “Fat chance.” But one more second of his fingers stroking my hair could work in his favor. The bastard knew it. “Can you stop with the games for a moment and answer something for me?”

“Anything.”

That was quite the window of opportunity. Instead of asking my intended question—why help me when we were competing against each other—I opted for one of more value. “What happened with Sophia? I barely know you, but she doesn’t seem like your type.”

Not that I did, either. Sophia reminded me of Ainsley, primed and polished to perfection, curves for miles. A hint of jealousy had burned at the sight of her, but I’d squashed that nonsense. Jimmy wasn’t mine. But Sophia was one step from posing for *Vogue*, and I was a J. Crew catalogue in the making. Then there was Jimmy and his bad, *bad* self. None of it fit.

He pushed a hand up the back of his hair. “Sophia and I dated for two years. I looked a lot different then, more like the cardboard cutouts in the contest.”

No freaking way. “Was your hair short?”

“Yep.”

“Did you have tattoos?”

“Nope.” He popped the P at the end and winked.

The man was lethal. “I am intrigued.”

“Let’s just say it took some shitty things for me to figure out who I really was, and for me to figure out who *Sophia* was. When I lost the winery and my shiny future, she hitched a ride on someone else’s train.”

“Jesus.” My heart squeezed, an urge to touch him and show my empathy surging, but his lips tightened into a stern line, like they had after he’d tasted his family’s wine. I folded my hands on my lap instead, silence blanketing us. Seeing Sophia today must have been more painful than I’d realized.

Blowing out a breath, he leaned forward, elbows on his knees. His T-shirt rode up his back, and his black boxers peeked out. I wanted to peek *in*. Push his shirt up and pull his jeans down and grip the length of him, experience everything I’d lost to the haze of alcohol. Touch more, see more, *know* more. Ask what happened with his father and curl into his side, voices whispered as we shared our secrets.

*My father would likely be unimpressed with this scenario.*

I’d never erased his last voice message and would never forget our final fight. As hard as my father had worked to provide for us, my mother had worked *harder* to fit in with the country-club crowd. Tired of her incessant phone calls and insistence I date certain guys or wear “the right” clothes, I’d hitched a ride on Gabe’s motorcycle, staking my independence. I was twenty-two and my mother still forbade me from bringing Gabe’s tattooed, blued-haired self to a fundraiser.

My reply: “Then I’m not coming, either.”

She didn’t speak with me for weeks afterward, the whole thing culminating in a fight between my father and me.

I still played his follow-up voicemail from time to time. I’d let his apologetic words seep into my dark corners, filling me with memories and sadness...and happiness, too. *Men like Gabe don’t stick around*, my father had said. *Boys like that are trouble. You are smart and talented and will be a success, and*

*I don't want anything to stand in your way. Then, But I'm sorry and I love you and We'll chat soon.*

A chat that never happened, but Gabe had proven my father right. He dumped me via text shortly afterward, saying things were too complicated for him.

My texted reply: *Sorry that my dad died. Must be hard for you.*

If my father were still alive, would he offer similar advice? Warn me Jimmy had been through the wringer with his family and wasn't capable of love. That I'd fall for him only to get hurt. That he and his tattoos and motorcycle were nothing but trouble. My feelings for Gabe hadn't been born of love or lust. Seeing him had been me thumbing the system. Giving in to my attraction to Jimmy as an adult was a different animal. A primal beast, curious and hungry. But my father's last words swarmed my mind. Unable to clear my head, I let our silence linger.

That's when Jimmy's inquisition started.

## CHAPTER NINE

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JIMMY

“You’ve met my ex and know I’m single, but I’ve seen you checking your cell plenty. Is there a man I should be aware of?” I patted the pillow she’d placed between us. “A reason you’re keeping your distance?” I’d done enough sharing for one day. Never wanted to think about Sophia and her betrayal again. Time to unravel more of Rachel.

She smiled tentatively. “Are you jealous?”

“Yes.”

She sucked in a breath at my honesty.

As soon as I’d acknowledged my deeper interest in Rachel to myself, the games stopped. I wanted her. Not just another night between the sheets (and on the floor and against the wall). I wanted a glimpse of that adoring look she’d leveled on me in the store, to stand together, her hand in my back pocket, my fingers in her hair, knowing she was mine. See if I could trust a woman again.

As a kid, I’d dreamed of being a professional soccer player. I’d watch every major league match, imagining my father cheering me on. Determined to earn a spot on the coveted CRL—California Regional League—I’d played soccer day and night. My mother would have to drag me inside to go to bed. I’d stopped hanging with my friends. I’d

made it, though. Played a few strong years, until girls and wine became more important.

My father only ever came to one game.

I figured it out then. My father may have withheld his affection, but if I wanted something tangible, lack of determination was my only roadblock. I aced my viticulture degree, traveled Europe to immerse myself in wines until I'd earned my Master Sommelier.

I planned to put as much effort into winning Rachel.

She dragged the first glass of Cabernet Sauvignon to the edge of the table, giving it a swirl. She brought it to her nose and inhaled. Instead of listing the aromas opening up, she said, "I don't have a boyfriend. I've been single for close to a year. The incessant cell noise is my mother. She's on the overprotective side."

I'd figured there was no other man, but it was nice to hear it. "You two are close?"

"She drives me insane at times, thinks every person she knows is a minute from catching an airborne disease, but I love her. You should have seen her at my high school art shows, telling anyone who'd listen I was her daughter, and wasn't I the most talented kid? Which was often followed by my childhood finger painting prowess, and the story about me and a naked Aaron Waxon covered in phthalo green."

"Sounds sweet." As was the way Rachel glowed, her memories lighting her from within.

"More like mortifying, but she always means well. My brother can be an ass, too, but we're close."

"Younger or older?"

"Physically, he's two years younger. He's twenty-five. Life-wise...definitely older."

Her voice thinned, insecurity in the hunch of her shoulders. She may be an adult, living on her own, but her self-worth was still tied to her family. Something I'd been well acquainted with until I shed that baggage. "What's wrong with your life?"

She replaced her glass on the table, untouched, and fell back onto the sofa. “I’ve held an obscene number of jobs since college. I can’t figure out what to do with my life, like I’m in one of those movies where I’m left floating in space and can’t find my way back to Earth.”

That would explain her quotes on the wall, the searching. She was a fine wine, developing, exploring her depth. I wanted to help uncork her. “What was the worst one?”

“Worst one what?”

“Worst job? If you’ve had that many, some must have been painful.”

She covered her face with her hands, like hiding would ease her embarrassment. “You have no idea.”

“Let’s hear it. I’d love to know the levels to which you’ve sunk.”

She stole a glance between her fingers. “When you say it like that, how can I resist?”

I removed her pillow barrier from between us and scooted closer. “I’m dying of curiosity.”

She didn’t pull away, didn’t shove that flimsy divider back between us. She uncovered her face and twisted toward me. “Okay, so, I don’t even know why I’m telling you, but I saw a classified ad that read ‘Must love animals.’ Next thing I knew, I was on the street in a poodle costume, waving a *Doggy Wash* sign.”

My grin stretched so wide my cheeks hurt, and Rachel covered her mouth, attempting to hold in her laughter. It escaped anyway, a snicker that rolled into a sharp cackle.

“The worst,” she said, dabbing at her eyes, “was my brother. He happened to drive by and see me, and he’s never let me live it down.”

A full-on snort followed, her head tipping forward as she gripped my thigh. Her whole body shook, and she nearly fell right into me. I lost it, too, everything about Rachel’s silly humor infectious. That ridiculous sound. Her willingness to

embarrass herself. The way she could flip from sultry to fun to feisty on a dime.

When we'd taken the ass photo, she'd laughed even harder. She would try to pose, then she'd tip over on her side, slapping the floor and cracking up. I'd have to walk around, my abs aching, my throat dry from laughing so damn much. When we finally nailed it, she shuffled toward me on her knees and kissed me while smiling, branding me with her joy. I'd never kissed a woman like that—both of us grinning, small laughs tumbling against each other's tongues.

Rachel was one of a kind.

She was also lost.

When our breathing regulated, we slouched into the couch, side by side, the edges of our hands touching. "You know what I find infinitely interesting about you, Ray?"

Her fingers twitched, a spark sent from the back of her hand to mine. "What?" she whispered.

"You have this wild innocence about you, on the surface. Looks like you work hard to keep your apartment neat. Keep things in order. You're sexy as hell in everything you wear, but your outfits seem calculated. It reminds me of how I used to be, trying to fit into a certain mold. The girl I met that first night was wild, and I'd bet there's more of her in you than you'd like to admit."

She snatched her hand away and clutched her thigh, avoiding our touch. "I don't think my psychological assessment figured into our deal."

I knocked my boot against the gray coffee table. Clean lines. Compact. Probably Ikea. "Am I wrong?"

She settled heavier into the cushion, her body no longer rigid. "I don't know."

"Trust me, I do. I'm older and wiser and speak from experience." I pushed my palm under hers and clasped our fingers, bringing her knuckles to my mouth for a soft kiss. "I see you, Sunshine. Now what do you say we rock this tasting?"

I sat up, pulling her with me, the warmth between our palms snapping across my skin. Until we both let go. She kicked off her heels and crossed her ankles. Her skirt rode up, exposing the curve of her knees. That stretch of smooth skin had my mind back on our first encounter and everything I wanted to see again.

“I’m ready,” she said.

I leaned in, our noses an inch apart. “Ready...meaning I can flip you over and eat your pussy now?”

Her cheeks burned the color of our Cabernet. “Incorrigible.”

“Honest.”

“Stick to the tasting.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do.” I zeroed in on her prim thighs, pressed so tightly together. Her denial of our pull only incited my craving. That was fine. She was worth the effort.

With two fingers on my chin, she flicked my attention away. We turned our focus to our wine tasting, but the barrier between us had lifted, truths shared clearing the way.

We swirled the glasses and listed the scents opening, inhaling the aroma of a crushed blackberry, then repeating the exercise, comparing notes. I pushed her to close her eyes and bite the green pepper, chew its tough skin, describe the layers of taste from bright to vegetal to bitter. The exercise was a decent one, but mostly I loved watching her jaw work, her tongue darting out to wet her lips, her soft hum as she sifted through the flavors. The moment it clicked, when she linked that vegetable to the aroma in her glass, she grabbed my knee and squealed.

It sent my pulse thundering.

I had a rip in the knee of my jeans, and her thumb dipped inside. I placed my hand over hers to still her movements. One brush, and I was ready to tug her on my lap and explore the dirty side she kept locked up.

She slipped her hand away. “I’ve done classes, spent hours at my father’s tastings, but Cabs were always elusive. It clicked tonight. So thank you.”

I shrugged. “Told you I’d uphold my end of the bargain. And that’s nice—that you and your father share wine.” No matter my effort, mine was always too busy building his business to enjoy a glass with me.

“*Shared*,” she said, her downturned eyes as sad as her voice. “He died five years ago.”

The admission sunk an anchor through my chest, taking my heart with it.

Unable to keep my distance, I threaded my hand into her hair and dipped my head to her level. “I’m sorry.”

There wasn’t much else to say. No words eased the blow loss dealt. I’d loved my mother’s father more than my own, and when my *pappous* had passed, I’d hid in the vineyard for hours, picking unripe grapes from the vines and crushing them with my fists. He’d kicked a soccer ball with me, had taken me by the hand and told me tales of the Greek gods as we’d walked our land. Hopefully Rachel saw understanding in my eyes.

She leaned into my hand. “The more time I spend with wine, the closer I feel to him. He loved it.”

The more time I spent with wine, the farther I felt from my family. But I was glad for her.

We stood, our tasting and time over. I offered to help clean up, but she waved me off, an end to our night.

I grabbed my jacket and paused at the door. “Give me your number.”

“Shouldn’t you ask, not demand?”

“If you remembered our night together, you’d know I’m more of the demanding sort.” I couldn’t resist another glimpse of her indignation.

It didn’t come. “How demanding?” Her voice purred with curiosity.

I stepped closer. “Very.”

Her eyes lit up, a breathy sigh escaping her lips. “I wouldn’t remember.”

“But you want to know, don’t you?”

She inched backward, until she hit her hallway wall. “Yes, but...”

“What’s stopping you, Ray? Because this quote...” I gestured to the one above her head: *Aim for the moon. If you miss, you may hit a star.* ~ *W. Clement Stone.* “How do you know I’m not that star? I’m burning pretty hot for you. What’s to say I’m not the thing you’ve been missing?”

There was little space between us—me hovering over her, her head tilted to search my face, determine my worth. She flattened her palms on my stomach and my abs tightened. If this was her keeping me away, it was having the opposite effect. But hesitation rippled from her.

I pressed closer, my lips a breath from hers. “I think I scare you. I think you can’t imagine yourself with me, or me in the life you’ve pictured, and you think I’m after a quick fuck. You’d be wrong on all accounts. Life is what you make it, and I can find a thousand quotes to hang on your walls to that effect. But it only falls into place if you honor who you are. I’m more comfortable in a dive bar than a yacht club. I get off on body art and speeding on my Harley. I’d also wager having you on the back, gripping me with your thighs and clutching my chest would kick the experience up a notch. I want to spend time with you, not just prove I can make you come with my tongue. Although I want that, too.”

Riled up and high on her scent, I brushed my lips against hers. Just a tease. She whimpered and eased her lips open, a small distance, enough for me to swipe my tongue along her bottom lip, stealing the tiniest taste. I pulled back, but her eyes remained closed.

“What’s going to happen now,” I said, my voice deeper than I’d ever heard it, “is I’m going to give you my number,

and when you think you're ready, you're going to call. Until then, I'd prefer if you don't ignore me when we're at Crush."

Her iPhone was the same model and color as mine. I grabbed it from her hall table and tapped her screen. No lock in place. I entered my details, smirking as I chose a name for my listing. She blinked at me the whole while, lost in a haze. I was having trouble functioning, too, that tiny bit of contact jumbling my senses. All but one.

*Desire.*

She'd call me. Of that I was sure. Question was when, and if I could wait that long.

"Until next time," I said, and she bit her lip.

As I turned, she said, "I've never met anyone like you. You have me all twisted up."

Jesus.

I glanced back, and my heart gave a kick. It was like we were back in the grocery store, her eyes full of nothing but me. She may have been twisted, but the need in her voice had me contorted in knots. "When you're ready, I'll untie you. We're not in a rush."

The intense moment lingered, agonizing seconds filled with scorching heat as we stared at each other. I was a heartbeat from pinning her back against that wall.

Instead I left. It would take a long, fast ride to subdue a fraction of my sexual frustration. But it was more than that. The urge to lock us in her apartment for a week, wine tasted and stories shared, was potent. The past two years had been nothing but time to stew while I excavated the edges of who I really was. Rachel made me laugh and challenged my wine knowledge, a gift for the time I'd endured. Like walking into Vesper had been fate.

I still had no clue what led me to the club that night, but fuck if I cared. I had Rachel now, even if she didn't realize it yet.

As I reached my bike, my cell rang. Maybe I wouldn't have to wait long, after all. But I frowned at the screen. *Alena Giannopoulos*. My mother's name had lit my phone often lately, a barrage of appeals I'd ignored. I did the same again.

Growing up, my mother would cook mountains of food for family gatherings. She'd tut over our cuts and sprains, always going out of her way to praise my accomplishments. She also worried over my father's heavy-handed ways, but never interfered. Not even when he gave me the ultimatum to break things off with Sophia or lose the winery. Not even when he followed through, and I lost both. My mother's meek acceptance of his authority hurt worse than his betrayal.

They could all go to hell—they and their lies tainting our family wine and my grandfather's legacy. The only call I planned on answering was from Rachel, a woman who spoke truth and offered innocence and oozed the promise of sin. Until then, I'd live off the meager taste I'd stolen.

## CHAPTER TEN

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RACHEL

One of the benefits of working reception at my gym was the free membership. It meant I could work out *gratis*, often with Ainsley and Gwen. Today my shift ended later than usual, which meant the girls had come and gone, and I had to squeeze in cardio before I met them for drinks—more like me begging for the outing and them agreeing.

My motto since Thursday night had been to keep on the move, socialize as much as possible, all systems *go, go, go*.

The girls and I didn't normally do Sunday nights out, but keeping occupied was my prime directive. Bad Boy's number had been burning a hole in my phone since he'd entered it three nights ago. That entire encounter had been a disaster. I'd stood there, useless, while his lips touched mine, his tongue teasing a seductive line, his ballsy predictions whispered in my ear. When I'd pulled up his number and saw what he'd written as his name, I unleashed my famous cackle.

*Six.* The guy had some nerve.

I'd scheduled every minute since then—bird watching, buying M&Ms and separating them by color, framing and hanging a new quote.

*“The question isn't who's going to let me; it's who is going to stop me.” ~ Ayn Rand.*

All endeavors helped force that phone number to the back of my mind. Briefly. I was on the treadmill now, vision hazy, once again fantasizing about Jimmy.

*Us* on the floor.

*My* mouth around his cock.

*His* scruff dragging across my thighs.

I upped my treadmill speed, but I couldn't chase away the sexual desire Jimmy had awakened. To my right, a guy—Matt, I think—hopped on the treadmill. He nodded my way, and I forced an answering smile. He was blond and fit, his suctioned tank top accentuating the work he'd put into his body. His clean-cut image and golden boy smile should have had my pulse buzzing. Except his skin was too plain, his hair too coiffed.

He wasn't *Six*. I ran harder.

As I neared my last five minutes, an older man stepped on the treadmill to my left. I'd met him recently, the grumbly sort who was forced to exercise for his health. When I'd asked him to fill out a new member questionnaire, he'd scanned the sheet, mustache twitching. His bushy eyebrows had framed his scowl.

"Emergency contact," he'd muttered, his words thick with disdain. "A ridiculous question." He'd scrawled his answers and shoved the page back to me, nothing on it legible.

Except for his emergency contact person: 911.

911 scowled at his treadmill, jabbing at buttons, curses garbled under his breath. My father had run marathons, trained indoors and out. He'd worked his heart like a maestro. It wasn't enough, but his time at the gym had prolonged his life, and any extra days with him were a bonus. At this man's age, it was even more important.

I slowed my treadmill to a fast walk, grabbing my towel to swipe at my chest and neck. Breathing easier, I hit stop and faced 911. "Can I help you, sir?"

He ground his teeth, as though chewing leather. “The machine is broken.”

I may not have been an electrical engineer (although I *had* sold lamps during my interior decorator phase), but the light displays were working fine, all necessary buttons aglow. Broken, the machine was not. The man reminded me of my grandfather, though, preferring to drive in circles rather than ask for directions. Tact would be needed.

I slung my towel over my shoulder. “Let me see what I can do.”

I jumped to the floor, followed the mess of wires, found his, unplugged it, then plugged it back in. Electrical engineer genius. I stood and dusted my hands together. “Let’s give it a shot now.”

Leaning over him, I hit the Start button...and the platform moved, *of course*. He grumbled, lifting his feet like the time I’d forced my mother’s schnoodle Stanley into doggy boots. The man was uncomfortable. Gyms, with their electronic equipment, weren’t exactly senior friendly. But heart health was important. If I’d waltzed over and pressed the one button he couldn’t find, 911 could have gotten frustrated and left.

I leaned over his dashboard. “These arrows control speed. Click up to go faster and down to go slower. These arrows”—I dragged my index finger to the incline—“tilt the base up, like walking up a hill. I’m Rachel, by the way.”

His reply: “I am not a child.”

*That* he was not. His sour expression had been excavated with age, the creases around his mouth sinking underground, his nose and chin pushed prominent. A face that had endured. “Just trying to explain the treadmill,” I said.

“As though I am a child.”

A child in need of a time out. “Anyway, I suggest you stick to a flat incline and speed up gradually. Next time, I can show you the programs.”

“I can do it myself.”

A time out *and* no dessert. “Don’t push me, old man. An attitude like that will land you in detention.”

With a harrumph, he ignored my teasing, and I patted his frail shoulder.

I hurried home and showered, in a daze the whole while. Because *Six, Six, Six*. I nearly dialed him three times, until I pulled up my father’s message and let his soothing tone tamp the urge. It also heightened my confusion. Hopefully drinks with Ainsley and Gwen would offer more distraction.



Drinks with Ainsley and Gwen were *not* a distraction. The first words out of Ainsley’s mouth when we sat down were, “Did my advice work? Did you tell Lone Wolf he was a shitty lay?”

Gwen frowned. “I thought she didn’t remember the sexcapade?”

“She doesn’t, but he’s in the wine contest with her, getting all flirty.”

Gwen leaned back in her seat. “I’d forget my dating sabbatical if it meant tapping that.”

Ainsley fanned her face dramatically. “Tell me about it. She’s nuts.”

“You guys know I’m at the table, right?”

They grinned.

Ainsley clicked her French-manicured nails against her wineglass. “So, spill it. How did he take your brush off?”

I drummed my thumb on my thigh. I stretched my neck. I wiped an invisible crumb off the table. “It’s busy here for a Sunday, don’t you think?”

“Oh.” Gwen rubbed her hands together. “This is gonna be good.” She plunked her elbows on the table, chin in hand. “Open the vault, Rachel. We need details.”

And I needed to dampen my Jimmy infatuation. This club was more casual than Vesper, with small groups gathered at wooden tables, white-washed brick walls surrounding us. But I couldn't help imagining him here. I was in the same tight jeans and heels I'd worn the fateful night I'd met him, but my fitted black blouse didn't have a dip in the back. There was no place for Jimmy to lay his hand if he were here, ready to buy me a drink.

If he appeared, would I say yes this time?

I rolled the edge of my cocktail napkin through my fingers. "I *may* have flirted with him and helped him deal with a sticky situation with his ex, and he *may* have come over to my place to taste wine afterward. He also may have kissed me and asked me to go out with him."

Ainsley pursed her lips. "Sounds very hypothetical."

Gwen wasn't impressed, either. She shifted on her seat and tousled her bobbed hair, while staring me down. "Sounds like we need to order you more drinks to loosen your tongue."

I pressed my hand over the top of my glass. "No more wine. Excessive wine leads to poor choices." I'd for sure drunk dial Bad Boy.

"Okay," Gwen said, "but this 'might have kissed' crap won't fly. Is he as good as he looks? Assuming you *remember* this time."

Did I ever. The promise of his lips. The bite of his scruff on my cheek. "If I'd actually kissed him back, I imagine it would have been unreal."

Ainsley crossed her arms, her ample cleavage spilling forth. A group of three men looked our way, but she was focused on me, intent on dredging up every agonizing detail. "This game of twenty questions is getting tiresome. I'd like specifics before our next birthday."

My phone rang, saving me from their inquisition. I pulled it from my purse, only to be faced with my mother's name. Still preferable to dissecting my boy drama.

I exhaled and answered. "I'm out with friends, Ma."

“This won’t take long. You remember Jonathan Richter, Joanna’s son?”

Again with the setups. “Yes, I remember Jonathan.” I’d last seen him three years ago at a housewarming party. He’d cornered me for an hour, his foul breath nearly melting my mascara.

“Well, he just moved back to town and is opening his own dental practice. Running the whole thing. He even has a playroom for kids and TV screens for patients. Very new age. I ran into him and asked him over for dinner next week.”

“Ran into” was code for “stalked the man to his place of work.” The woman had no shame. And, *God*, I hated how desperate she made me look, even to a man I had no interest in dating.

Ainsley mouthed, *Blind date?*

I nodded and whispered, “*Jonathan Halitosis Richter.*”

She proceeded to fake choke herself, complete with bugging eyes and extended tongue. Gwen jumped in on the game, sticking her finger down her throat and pretending to dry heave.

I giggled. “That’s nice of you, Ma, but I’m not interested in Jonathan.” If he still looked the same, his stiff posture, parted brown hair, and tweed vest would fit right in with my mother’s crown moldings and opulent carpets. A chess piece carved to match.

I imagined Jimmy in her immaculate living room. Tattoos. Wild hair. *Dare Me* shirt. His toned body draped over a Queen Anne chair.

My mother would faint at the sight.

“I can’t cancel, Rachel.” Her exasperated tone grated my eardrum.

“Then I hope you have a nice dinner. Invite Mitchell. They were friends in high school.” Dating Jonathan Halitosis Richter would be so much easier than falling for Bad Boy, but I was done with her random set-ups.

When I managed to end the call, Ainsley grabbed my cell and placed it on the table. “As fun as that was to watch, let’s get back to the kiss that didn’t happen. Explain yourself.”

From one ambush to another. My phone lay on the table, Jimmy’s number tucked inside. The number I’d like to sneak away and call right now. I had it memorized. I’d hummed the digits in time to Michael Jackson’s “Bad” all freaking day.

“Here’s the deal,” I said. “I was close to caving in and hooking up again, but I’ve gotten to know Jimmy since, and truth is...I like the guy. Like, *really* like him. And he’s talking about more than a fling. I just don’t see how we could work.”

Gwen stayed silent, assessing me.

Ainsley wasn’t so subtle. “So you’re, like, into him, but you won’t go out again? You’ve dated umpteen guys, always upset when the sparks don’t fly. What am I missing? And if you go out with Jonathan Halitosis Richter, I will unfriend you.”

“*That* you don’t have to worry about.”

Gwen’s vigil ended. “She’s terrified of her mother and can’t picture Jimmy and his tattoos in her tidy life.”

Damn her observant self. “Something like that.”

At twenty-two, I’d have reveled in taking Jimmy to one of my mother’s luncheons, watching her face turn purple at the sight of him. At twenty-seven, I wasn’t so sure. That very thing had pushed my mother and me apart once, an outcome that would devastate me today. No matter her overbearing tendencies, she was my last living parent. I needed her in my life.

Gwen’s dissection of my psychological behavior didn’t end there. “Is the Gabe Factor an issue, too?”

Ainsley’s blue eyes narrowed, as though she’d caught her stylist applying the wrong highlights. “I still say we should have painted his motorcycle pink.”

I hadn’t accepted that particular offer, but the three of us never hesitated to volunteer our payback services. When

Ainsley had confessed that her ex had cheated on her, Gwen and I had filled his door lock with expanding foam.

“Aside from the rough-and-tumble thing,” I said, “Jimmy isn’t like Gabe. He has baggage, though—an ex and some family drama that really messed him up. So it’s a lot, I guess. He’s hot as hell and we have fun, and he has this lost-puppy vibe that’s hard to resist, but simple relationships are hard enough. Add in all this other...*stuff*, and it just seems too hard.” My father’s saved message added weight to my turmoil. More complications tangling my mind.

Gwen didn’t blink. “Dating him doesn’t mean you have to marry the guy. I get that you’re after something serious, but maybe you need to let loose for a change. You’ve spent the last five years keeping your mother happy. Never stepping out of line. Gabe was a dick, but dating him was you testing yourself. When you drink, and your inhibitions unwind, a different Rachel comes out to play. I think she’s more the real you than you’d like to admit.”

“Do I have to pay for this shrink session now, or can I trade it for wine later?” I could joke all I wanted, but the blunt truth stung, as it had when Jimmy had suggested something similar.

Had my life deteriorated to such an extent? Leapt out of my control? I’d raise hell to see my mother happy and healthy, as well as keep us on good terms. Was losing myself in the process worth it? If I wasn’t careful, I’d wind up as her shadow—big brooches, bigger shoulder pads, football-helmet hair.

My plethora of jobs had been desperate attempts to tap into the elusive something that made me tick. But I’d always come up short. Even now, with the sommelier possibility, doubt crept in. I wasn’t just good at the contest tastings, I was *great*. Not so with the service exercises. Each loathsome task massaged my insecurities. The whole point of quitting and starting over was to find *The Job*. The one that would fulfill my resolution by following my dreams, so I could discover if the blackout that night had really been magical and would catapult the rest of my life from fine to sublime.

As much as I loved the tastings, executing a busy night at Crush and running between tables didn't sound sublime. It didn't sound like *The Job*.

But I was too far in, my options too limited.

My wardrobe didn't appeal to me, either. It was necessity, function over form. Even Jimmy had called me on it. *You look sexy as hell in everything you wear*, he'd said. *But your outfits seem calculated*.

He'd also said I'd been wild the night we hooked up.

The more I replayed his words, the more curious I became, longing building in a steady rise. Jimmy could be my ticket. He could help me explore myself, push my boundaries. I just didn't know if I could offer him more. "If I call him, what would I even say?"

Gwen picked at a callus on her palm. "Set some ground rules. Tell him you'd like to hang out, but you don't want anything serious. No guy on the planet would say no to that. Then figure things out as you go. No pressure."

"I don't know..." But my body did. Anticipation tightened my lower belly, heat gathering. Still, I didn't make a move.

Ainsley, however, did. She snatched my phone from the table.

I shoved my upturned palm in her face. "Give it here, Ainsley. I'll call him when I'm ready."

"I'm staging an intervention and calling now. And if you don't want people going through your phone, you should lock the thing." She squinted at the screen. "You did say his name was Jimmy, right? Because it's not here."

Things just kept getting better. "He used a different name."

She twitched her button nose. "What name?"

*Why, why, why* did he have to be so persistent, programming *Six* and toying with my mind? I could tackle Ainsley and reclaim my phone, or feign ignorance, but she had on her "don't mess with me" face. I wouldn't win this battle.

“Six,” I said.

“Six?”

“Yes. Six.”

“Like the number?”

“Exactly like the number.”

Gwen plucked the phone from Ainsley, the two of them intent on cracking Jimmy’s code. “Is he like a divergent? Like Four? What’s with the number?”

Lying and diverting their attention tempted me again, but they’d caught the scent of juicy gossip, the hint of my drama like tossing a live chicken to wolves. “He claims he made me orgasm six times.”

Gwen sipped the last of her wine, placed the glass down, and slid it aside. “Honestly, the fact that you don’t remember that night is a travesty. We need to remedy this situation.” She raised my phone, but hesitated. “Does that mean you came from oral?”

If there was a God. “Supposedly, and give me my phone. I’ll text him.”

“Damn,” was all she said, and handed it over

I could back down, stash my cell and make a break for it, but these two hound dogs were out for blood. And fighting the urge to see Jimmy again was a losing battle.

My text was short and sweet.

Me: Are you around?

Jimmy: At work. Get off in an hour. You should come by.

I chewed my cheek and flexed my toes, then I wrote back.

Me: Sure.

Time to discover the woman I was meant to be. Once he sent the address, I stuffed my phone away and faced the girls.

“I’m meeting him at work.”

Ainsley clapped. “Excellent. When should we leave?”

*Come again?* “I must have heard you wrong, because it sounded like you said *we*.”

Her bright eyes shone with glee. “If we leave this in your court, you might chicken out and do your overthinking thing. I also think we should suss him out. Make sure he’s not messing with you before another round of Naked Twister goes down.”

On that note, I stumbled after them, unsure how I’d lost control of the night.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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JIMMY

The bar was winding down, Sundays never busy. I kept glancing at the entrance, waiting for Rachel to show, unsure what the hell to expect. Her messages were short. Nothing flirtatious. No mention of the name I'd programmed into her phone.

I shined a glass, then stared at the door. I stocked the beer fridge and snuck another glance.

Rudy's Tavern was more dive than bar, the wooden floors roughened by herds of work boots. The women drank as hard as the men, the pool tables home to soured bets and raised voices. Rock anthems played on repeat. Conservative Rachel would be quite the sight in here, sitting all proper on a wonky stool. A sight I'd happily drink in.

My phone buzzed, hopefully not her backing out. It wasn't, but seeing my mother's name was just as frustrating. A text this time. I'd deleted her emails, considered blocking her number. She could beg me to visit their new apartment all she liked, but I wasn't stepping within a mile of the place.

A few more customers left, only the diehards lingering. A crew from the neighborhood talked over one another as they finished their pints. Rick, the ironworker, was talking shit to Mel as she bussed tables, a tango they'd perfected. It usually ended with her flipping him the finger, and him begging for a date. She was thirty years his junior.

As I wiped down the bar, the front door swung wide. I straightened, fisting my towel and crossing my arms. No one entered. A few seconds passed, then a few more. I was about to stride over and poke my head outside, when Rachel stepped in. Her eyes darted from the classic rock albums on the wall to the ceiling fan that looked a minute from falling. She brushed at her jeans, tugged down the edge of her black top. Her brown hair fell loose around her shoulders, her freckles not as visible in the dim light. She was a vision.

A vision who wasn't alone.

Two escorts followed on her heels, flanking her like bodyguards. I remembered her friends from the night we'd met, but hadn't paid them much attention. Not when Rachel was all I could see. The tall one with the shorter hair and bangs looked tough enough to take Cris Cyborg in a fight, her tank top showing off toned arms. Her face was all business as she studied the room. The other one had Rick's jaw hitting the floor. She was shorter, cleavage and curves for days. Mile-high heels. All she was missing was a Chihuahua tucked into her purse.

The tough woman took the lead, arms swinging as she headed for me. "Jimmy?"

"As I live and breathe."

She held out her hand, her expression stern as she waited on me. I tossed the towel and gave her hand a shake. She caught my fingers in a vise grip. "I'm Gwen, this is Ainsley, and you of course know Rachel. We thought it would be fun to get acquainted."

Looked more like an ambush.

Ainsley fluttered her fingers. Rachel was a fidgety mess. I fanned a hand toward the bar stools, inviting them to sit. Better to face the firing squad head on.

Ainsley and Gwen sat in front of me, Rachel to the side, but as Gwen opened her mouth, Rick sauntered over and leaned on the bar, facing Ainsley. "My Malibu is parked outside. How about a ride, beautiful?"

Ainsley flipped him the bird. “How’d you like to ride this?”

He sighed. “I’m losing my charm.” He plunked down his empty glass and dragged his sorry ass to the door.

“He’s harmless,” I said.

Ainsley cocked her head at me. “He’s old enough to be my grandfather.”

“He just likes to talk to the ladies. Makes him feel young.”

“If I wanted to hear an asshole speak, I’d set up residence in the bathroom.”

Chuckling, I leaned against the back counter and slid my attention to Rachel. “Having a nice night?”

“Peachy,” she replied, her top button quivering with her shaky breaths.

I didn’t know how the current situation had transpired, what had gone down for Gwen and Ainsley to show up at my work, too, but if it brought me a step closer to ripping off Rachel’s clothes, I was all in.

Until Gwen said, “Are you a player?”

The gloves were off. “I don’t gamble, if that’s what you mean.”

“You know what I mean.” The woman didn’t mince words.

I could have claimed I was too busy and spent the next forty-five minutes closing the bar, waiting them out. I could have asked to speak with Rachel alone, gotten to the bottom of the ambush. Those were both easy outs. But I’d been serious when I told Rachel I wanted more, and that came with the truth. “I’ve had a number of one-night stands, but the women I’ve been with always knew the score. So I’d go with no, I’m not a player.”

The next shot came from Ainsley. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

I shook my head. “Single.”

Then they alternated fire.

“Are you on any dating websites?”

“None.”

“Has a woman ever slapped you?”

“Not that I recall.”

“Have you ever hit a woman?”

“What the fuck kind of question is that? And the answer is *hell no*.” I lowered my hands over my nuts just the same. These girls weren’t messing around.

At least Rachel’s friends cared. When Sophia had left me and my life imploded, my acquaintances had thinned, until none were left. They’d either tired of my sullen moods or weren’t genuine. It made me more self-sufficient, a state of being I craved. Or used to, at least. I was glad for Rachel, though. Happy she had people in her corner.

The next shot came from her. “Have you ever shoplifted?”

Not the question I expected. “Once. A pair of sunglasses on a dare.” That’s what happened when sixteen-year-old boys had beer and too much time on their hands.

Rachel’s third degree continued. “Do you do drugs?”

“Does getting high on you count?”

“Have you ever been in jail?”

“I’m in purgatory now, waiting on you.”

Ainsley snickered. “I like this guy.”

Rachel rolled her eyes.

It was time to start steering the conversation. I gripped the bar and leaned toward Gwen and Ainsley. “Why is Rachel fighting my advances?”

A smug smile slid across Gwen’s face. “You’re not exactly her type.”

Finally, we were getting somewhere. “What is her type?”

Ainsley held up her hand and ticked each finger. “Smart. Driven. Un-inked. Family man. Great job. She basically wants to date her dad.”

Rachel waved from her seat. “Remember me? The girl you’re gossiping about? I’m sitting right here.”

I ignored her, the intel too juicy to quit. Not that Ainsley’s descriptions surprised me. The way Rachel worked at life—her pens lined up, wardrobe appropriately conservative, careers tried and failed—she was forcing a square peg into a round hole. She needed to tap into whatever it was that drove her, fed her soul, or she’d chase her tail forever. Her “type” needed an overhaul, too. She’d reacted to me the other day, deeply. She just couldn’t admit it.

I slid my forearm on the bar, angling my back to Rachel. “I am clearly not her dad. So how do you suggest I get her over to my place?”

Gwen’s face lit up with amusement, then she studied me, narrowing her eyes as the moments passed. She opened her mouth to reply, but Rachel beat her to it. “I’m not after anything serious. If we hang out, you have to promise it’s casual.”

I spun to find her sitting taller, chin raised, confidence in her strong posture.

I’d pegged Rachel as a relationship girl, only dating to find Mr. Right. Either my instincts were off, or this was her testing the waters. Feeling me out before opening up. I still didn’t know if I could trust a woman fully, not after Sophia. Giving someone your heart only to find out she’d been using you was a hard pill to swallow. Rachel didn’t seem the type, but my character assessment had proven shitty once.

Still, I’d thought about her since Thursday, restlessly, imagining our kiss deepening, instead of her holding stiff. I’d stroked myself to the memories of our one wild night. I wanted to hear her ridiculous laugh, feel her thighs bracketing mine as we toured wine country on my bike. Sit with her under the sun, wine sipped, cheese nibbled, her hair tickling my neck.

I wanted *us*.

If that meant agreeing to a casual affair, so be it. The sex had been unreal, and once I jogged her memory and had her gripping my scalp and screaming my name, she'd have to admit our connection was deeper than a fling. If not, I'd at least get another taste.

I slapped the bar. "Done. We hang out, nothing serious, just two people having fun." I shifted toward Rachel, her lips within biting distance. "That good with you, Sunshine?"

She crossed her legs. She made me wait for it. Finally, she said, "Deal."

I grinned. "Excellent. Can I get you ladies anything for last call? Drinks are on me."

"Something colorful in a martini glass," Ainsley said.

"White wine," Gwen replied.

"Red?" I asked Rachel, and she nodded.

I fixed Ainsley a cosmo and poured a glass of white for Gwen. I chose our only decent Cabernet and slid it in front of Rachel. Her fingers brushed mine, and my thighs tensed, electricity passing between us. She held my stare, neither of us moving, both breathing fast, until duty called. But my mind was an hour ahead, to us groping each other, our clothing littering the floor. Damn, did I want her.

The regulars filtered out, leaving only Mel helping me close up and the girls chatting. Rachel nursed her wine, heated glances shot my way. I had half a mind to kick everyone out, lock the doors, and bend her over a table. I settled on teasing the little minx.

I approached her from behind, collecting the pretzel bowl beside her and bending toward her ear. "You're coming home with me tonight. I will undress you and lick your pussy and fuck you hard, and then you can decide if you want to sleep over or leave. But make no mistake, I will be inside you tonight."

I bit the bottom of her ear, and her answering moan sent my dick pressing against my zipper, eager for more. The next twenty minutes couldn't go fast enough.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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RACHEL

Jimmy had the dirtiest mouth I'd ever heard, and it turned me on. Like *whoa* turned me on. I didn't know dirty talk got me hot. Everything about him jacked up my temperature: the roughness of his ripped jeans, his tattoos, the brush of his callused fingers against mine. Jimmy sent my pulse thrumming, and the past ten minutes had ticked by too slowly.

Ainsley sipped the last of her cosmo and perched higher on her stool. "So, Jimmy, have you ever seen *River Monsters*?"

He stood from organizing something below the bar and scratched his neck. "Is that the fishing show?"

Gwen's smirk was all mischief. "Yeah. They travel all over to find terrifying species of freshwater fish. Have you ever seen the Candiru episode?"

"Never seen any. Don't watch much TV."

I swallowed my laugh, knowing what was coming. A few months ago, when I'd texted the girls from a horrific date, they showed up, feigned surprise at the sight of me, and had proceeded with their Candiru performance. My date, Liam, had turned a shade of green I can only describe as rotten avocado, then made an excuse about having to get home.

I sat back to enjoy the show.

"So anyway," Ainsley said, "they found this crazy species of fish called a Candiru. It's a thin, slippery little sucker."

“And it’s attracted to urine,” Gwen continued, her face glowing with excitement. “In this one episode, there was this guy urinating in the river, and the fish”—she paused for effect—“swam up his penis.”

Jimmy paled.

“If it gets too much,” I said, “just tap out.”

He shot me a worried frown. “It gets worse?”

“Much.”

“I can take it.”

The man was a trooper.

Gwen swirled her wineglass, always one to accept a challenge. “The fish has these gnarly spines, so once inside it anchored itself to him. Sucked his blood. Gnawed on his flesh. He tried to pull it out, of course, but the things are slippery as a wet bar of soap. It wouldn’t budge.”

Jimmy went from pale to ashen, his jaw clenched tight.

Ainsley leaned on her elbows, dropping her voice to a whisper. “They raced the guy to the hospital, and he was there for, like, two hours. The fish just hung on. They debated cutting him open to retrieve it, but decided on inserting pincers through the tip to—”

Jimmy shot his hands in the air. “Tapping out!”

He gave a shiver and strode away, muttering to himself.

Ainsley called after him, “I have a friend in marine biology. Mess with Rachel, and you’ll regret it.”

He didn’t glance back, but I cackled.

Man, did I love my girls.

Once they’d said their goodbyes, I waited for Jimmy to finish, my last few minutes spent in a lust-induced haze. His dirty promises echoed in my ear.

*Undress you. Lick your pussy. Fuck you hard.*

Please, and thank you.

My body was alive with want, awareness pulsing through my blood. My calves tingled against my jeans, the breeze of the ceiling fan like feathers through my hair. Even my fingertips prickled. I sensed Jimmy behind me before I felt him. He ran his hands down the outside of my thighs, his heat flowing over me. “Sorry it’s taking me so long. You okay?”

“Yeah.” My voice was nothing but a whisper. “I’m okay.”

His concern melted something in my chest, though. I could no longer deny my pure *need* for Bad Boy, but the gentleness in his soothing tone threatened my plan. Our time together would be research and nothing more. I would explore my sensuality and take pleasure for myself. I wouldn’t fall for him.

He squeezed my legs. “I’ll be done soon. And for the record, your friends are terrifying.”

I would have laughed, offered a witty reply, but my rising body heat burned a path up my lungs. He kissed the top of my head and returned to cashing out.

Breathless, I waited.

Ten minutes later, his hand was on my lower back as he guided me toward his Harley, all that black and chrome glinting with danger. The bike I’d always wanted to ride, with the guy I would be *riding* shortly. He passed me a helmet and stared a beat too long. “You really are beautiful.”

I almost dropped the helmet.

He straddled his bike and nodded for me to join him. “You better hold on tight.”

*And never let go*, I thought. A notion I needed to extinguish. Every second with him became riskier, his compliments and gestures planting roots in my heart. I slung my leg over his metal beast and plastered myself to his back. There was that scent again—leather and spice with a hint of gasoline. Unadulterated man. My mother would have fainted at the sight of us. He paused, tightening my arms around him and resting his hand over mine. My belly dipped. It was an intimate gesture, sweet. Something a boyfriend would do.

Then he revved the engine.



The kissing began before we made it into his apartment. He slammed my back against the wall, one hand anchoring my neck, the other branding my hip as his lips crushed mine. And the sound I made? I'd never been so filled with longing, so utterly undone. That motorcycle ride had flipped my bad-girl switch—wind in my face, Jimmy between my thighs, the roar of the engine. The trip to his place had been both too fast and too slow.

And we hadn't made it past his hallway.

I'd never groped a man in a public space, let him suck my neck and squeeze my breast and rock his erection into my belly, but I was lost. Entranced. Absorbed in the feel of him. I latched one leg around his, palmed his ass, whimpered into his mouth. Heat scorched my core. An answering groan rumbled from his chest. His tongue stroked mine, his lips hard yet soft.

"Inside," he murmured.

"Not yet," came my reply, because I liked this. I liked that we could get caught. Any moment, someone could happen upon us, all roaming hands and gasping as we explored each other. It only made me hotter. Regular Rachel would never have been so bold; that was a job for Reckless Rachel. With only two glasses of wine in my system, my abandon wasn't alcohol induced.

I was drunk on Jimmy.

He kissed me harder, his cock like steel against my hip. *I* did that to him. I was driving the man wild. With a grunt, he gripped my shoulders and pushed away, his full lips puffier and glistening from our kiss. He eyed me hungrily. The thick line of him stretched his jeans, and I gripped his length, stroking and squeezing through the worn denim. He rocked, unsteady on his feet.

Two strokes later, he gripped my wrist, stilling my greedy movements. He shoved his hand into his front pocket and fished out a key. Working quickly, he led us in, then kicked the door shut, crushing his mouth back on mine.

I tugged his hair.

He bit my neck.

We devoured each other.

He pulled back long enough to toss his jacket and undo the top button of my blouse, but he fumbled, an impatient “*Fuck*” following. He growled and ripped it open, plastic buttons pinging against his floor.

There went piece seven in the ensemble. “That was an important part of my wardrobe,” I said, bra exposed, goose bumps spreading across my stomach.

He stared, eyes hooded. “Seeing your tits was more important than saving that shirt.”

The man had a way with words.

His apartment came into focus then. It looked the same as last time, just as barren. And lonely. As vacant as the room was, the shadows of what we’d done in here still teased me. I replayed Jimmy’s stories, picturing us uncorking the Screaming Eagle and laughing together, him taking that ridiculous butt shot. We’d had fun, he claimed, and I sensed it, the ease with which I lost myself around him proof enough.

His hands gripped my waist, warm and rough, and I jumped at the contact. He sucked a path down my neck and tugged my bra cup lower, just below my nipple. I dropped my head back on a sigh. His scruff scratched my sensitive flesh... and Jesus, he *bit* me. A subtle sting, surprising in its pressure. Surprising in how good it felt. He moved, walking me backward, his mouth busy on my breast, my hands in his hair, until the back of my legs hit his bed. With a light shove, I fell onto his mattress, but he didn’t join me. He toed off his boots and pulled off my heels.

Then he looked.

And looked.

He rubbed his hand over his jeans, stroking his cock through the fabric, soaking me in like I was a porn star splayed for his amusement. I wanted to touch myself, too. In private, I used my vibrator (the Dildo Incident had its plus side), but I'd never masturbated in front of a man. Now my fingers drifted across my ribs, a slow drag toward my jeans. But I chickened out. I couldn't do it. Couldn't be as bold as Jimmy, who was basically jacking himself off at the foot of the bed.

"Take off your jeans," I said, eager to see the length of him. Watch him stroke himself.

His blue eyes turned molten, and his jaw slackened. "Not yet. First, I'm going to peel off *your* jeans and taste you, and you're going to come on my tongue."

Yep. A way with words.

Men had gotten me hot before, turned me on, but the second their heads were between my legs, I'd lose the edge of my desire. The burn would slip into a dull ache that would vanish. Easy come, easy go. I'd stress about keeping my abs tight, in case the guy looked up. I'd worry about the position of my legs, if I should touch his head or grip the sheets or groan to show support. (Good job, buddy!) Once, in college, I spent the time reviewing for a test.

Jimmy promised more.

Before he stripped me bare, he covered my body with his. "You're so fucking hot," he said. His next kiss was deep and wet, sending me to oblivion. "All that innocence hiding this wild woman. When I'm inside you, I want to hear you scream."

If he didn't do something soon, I might have screamed then and there.

I didn't have to. He reached behind me, unhooked my bra, and dragged it off. His mouth fell to my breast while his hand cupped me over my denim. I rocked into him as he pressed harder. "This needs to happen," I said, desperate.

"Patience, Sunshine."

His use of my nickname spurred my desire, as though I were his. A woman he took care of, in the bedroom and out. He worked my body over, lavishing my breasts with attention, sliding lower, kissing my belly, nipping my hips as he dragged off my jeans. He tossed them to the side, never breaking contact. He kissed me over my underwear, his hot breath working me into a frenzy. By the time my cotton thong hit the floor, nuclear war could have been declared. The last iceberg could have melted. As long as I had Jimmy and that tongue and those hands on me, the world could crumble.

His first lick was slow. Divine torture. I let my legs fall wide, not caring how I looked. I threaded my fingers through his hair, the dark strands tangled in my grip, and I rocked toward him, unabashed. Need in my movements. Little moans escaped me. Not on purpose. Not as a way to speed things along. Everything I did was involuntary. I was his marionette, pushed and pulled and lit on fire.

He spread me wide, his tongue flicking over me, the rhythm building. A symphony nearing its crescendo. I dug my heels into his sides, and he groaned, sinking one, then two fingers inside me. The room disappeared. *I* disappeared. Nothing remained but that one point of contact, all my nerve endings gathered in a tight bud.

Then I exploded. A cry wrenched from my throat, the sound unfamiliar, my body alight. He pushed me further, took me higher, until I was nothing but sensation. Pulsing light. His final lick, slow and languid, had me pulling away, too sensitive to be touched.

He kissed my inner thigh. Even that subtle press made my stomach clench.

“Tell me, Ray, do you still think I lied about the six orgasms?” He knelt over me, fully clothed, caging me with his hands. His lips were wet with my taste. He was deliciously disheveled. All that hair tousled, impossibly thick eyelashes, dark eyebrows set off by blue eyes, slivers of gunmetal swirling at the edges—the man was magnificent.

“I can’t be sure,” I said. “I need to do some further studies. Cover all the variables.” I traced the veins up his inked forearms until my fingers coasted below his cuffed sleeves. “Take this off before I rip the buttons.”

He jumped off the bed and pulled me with him—into him, my naked body pitched against his jeans and belt. The contrast was sinful. “I prefer you to rip,” he said.

Well then. I gripped the edges of his shirt and yanked. Or tried, at least. The thing snagged and didn’t budge. “I’m ruining the sexy,” I said.

He chuckled. “Let’s go with the buttons.”

Impatient, I reached for his jeans instead, unlatching the large belt buckle. If I lifted that sucker, I’d get a killer workout. Next came his button, the slide of metal through frayed denim teasing, too close to what I ached to see. What I *had* seen but couldn’t remember. I dropped to my knees, undid his zipper, and slid his jeans and black briefs to the floor.

That’s when I said, “What the hell is that?”

“*Now* you’re ruining the sexy.”

“No. Seriously. What *is that*?”

“In case you weren’t aware, those are the last words a guy wants to hear when a girl pulls down his pants.”

He sounded amused, and he must have removed his shirt, because the gray plaid pooled beside me, but I couldn’t look up. I could only stare at his cock, thick and hard and standing at attention. “Did you know you have a piece of metal through your penis?”

His answering laugh had the piercing catching the light and winking at me. “I have a vague recollection of getting it done. I’m also having *déjà vu*. We had this whole conversation last time we hooked up.”

He stepped out of his jeans, but I stayed put, entranced, the floor digging into my knees. He was thick and long. His shaft curved up, the taut skin flushed deep red, and there, on the underside, just below his swollen head was a bar through his

skin, a silver ball on either end. I reached for it, but drew my hand back. “Does it hurt, if I touch it?”

“In the best way,” he said, his voice low and rough.

I looked up. He was fit and muscular, not bulky. More tattoos decorated his ribs, but his flat stomach and the broad planes of his chest were ink free. There was more metal—two hoops through his nipples, his silver chain hanging between them. His bad-boy factor just tipped the bad-boy scale.

And I was a minute from coming again.

I slid my fingers around his thick thighs and licked the piercing. He gripped my hair, a guttural sound following. Apparently he liked that. I took another taste, the metallic sting sharp on my tongue. Moving one hand around his shaft, I slid my tongue in circles, each pass landing on the barbell, giving it a gentle tug.

His hold tightened on my hair. I sucked him deeper, always finishing on the tip, exploring his piercing. His groans escalated, as did his dirty words.

*Love fucking your mouth. My dick is so hard. I can still taste your pussy.*

My fascination gave way to hunger, the rush so thick my mind blurred. I wanted him. No, I *needed* him inside me. I needed to feel that barbell dragging along my sensitive walls.

I circled my tongue once more, then stood. “Sex has to happen.”

He pulled me close, his erection pressed to my hip. He coasted his lips over my jaw. “I was counting on it.”

I dragged my fingers between his pecs, enjoying the softness of his chest hair, finally touching his nipple rings. “Have you been tested? Are you clean?”

He stilled. “Yes.” He dipped his head to catch my eye. “What’s going on in that mind of yours?”

“I want to feel *it*. Feel you inside me. No condom. I’ve been tested, and I’m on the pill,” I added, like that was the only thing stopping us.

I'd only had unprotected sex with my last boyfriend, my mother's fear of disease ratcheting up my caution. I trusted Jimmy, though. I didn't know him that well, but my intuition said he'd never hurt me. And I was drunk on the man.

His hips rotated, mine joining his rhythm, a subtle rocking of our naked bodies. "I've never been bare in a woman. My ex had an issue with the pill, and it never happened. I've been tested, too. But I'm not sure this is a good idea."

I slid my hand between us, gripping him. "Aren't *you* supposed to be the wild one?"

My recklessness knew no bounds.

He made a pained sound at the back of his throat, then he pressed his forehead to mine. "Do you trust me?"

"I do."

"Does this mean you're staying over?"

I stilled my movements. Staying over sounded better than sipping another Screaming Eagle Cabernet, his hard body tangled around mine divine. But sleeping over led to feelings, which led to commitment, which led to entrenched lives. An outcome I wasn't ready to entertain. "No. It's too much. You said you were okay keeping it casual." To convince him, I stroked him again, his erection like silken steel.

He shuddered. "You are dangerous." Then he gripped my hips. "This is how it's going to go. I'm going to fuck you and come inside you, *bare*. I'm too turned on and can't be gentle. You probably won't come, but the next round will be all about you. That work for you, Sunshine?"

All I could do was nod.

He lifted me up and carried me to the middle of his bed, all pretense gone. Then he seized my ankles, anchored them on his shoulders, and wrapped his hand around the base of his cock, guiding it toward me. He didn't push in, just moved the head around, over me and toward my entrance, the slide of his piercing dizzying. I canted my hips, coaxing him. Asking for it. A muscle in his jaw ticked, the only sign he was holding back.

Until he wasn't.

He pushed into me, a long drag that had him dropping his head forward, a pained "*Christ*" rumbling from his chest. His pause didn't last long. Neither did the slow pace. He dug his fingers into my hips and pounded into me, his gaze locked on where we were joined. My focus was glued on *him*. The ripple of his abs as he contracted. The veins on his neck, tight with exertion. His thrusts rocked me, so forceful I couldn't move. I could only take. *And take*. My pleasure coiled, the nudge of his piercing teasing me.

Then he exploded. "Fuck. Fuck. *Oh, fuck.*" His orgasm was forceful, a storm unleashed, and my lust spiked.

Him unhinged was a beautiful sight, and I took him there.

His guttural sounds brought me closer, but not to the brink, as predicted. He eased my ankles from his shoulders and lowered his body, until we were flush. His dangling chain tickled my collarbone. "Is this what you wanted to feel? My hard cock inside you?"

The storm had passed, his movements as smooth as the tide. "Yes," I said.

I loved his dirty words, but couldn't reciprocate. Couldn't voice how I *liked* him fucking me. How the roughness turned me on. When he cupped my breast and pinched my nipple, I didn't scream *yes* and *harder*. I simply moaned.

He softened inside me, the fullness less acute, but he kept moving, shallower glides, in and out. Until he thickened again. It didn't take long, each roll of his hips deepening. His lips captured mine, our kiss as languid as his movements, and my heart swelled. It shouldn't have swelled. We were having sex. *Fucking*. Not making love. But being joined to him, nothing between us, was more dangerous than sleeping over.

I turned my head, focused on his boxing gloves hanging from his closet door, the red leather scuffed in spots. I gripped his shoulders, moving with him. Up, down. Together. Hips connecting. Him so full inside me, and that bit of metal. He

pulled out farther, making sure it nipped my entrance, then slid back in. *So, so good.*

He shifted onto one elbow, one of his hands sinking into my hair. His other pushed between us, touching where we were joined. “Rachel.”

I closed my eyes, lost to the feel of him.

“Rachel,” he said again. “Look at me.”

I couldn't comply. Agreeing to this fling wasn't his first choice, and he was testing me. Calling me on my bullshit, knowing I was falling for him. I could deny it all I wanted, but a lump built in my throat, worsening each time our hips met. One look, and he'd see it. Everything I denied. But I couldn't have sex with him, bare, and shut him out, as tempting as it was.

So I looked.

His gaze was fierce, locked on me, like he was memorizing my face, and my heart burned up. My chest constricted, my eyes a watery mess. I bit my cheek, keeping my emotion at bay. This man who had no one in his life, had invited me in. And I offered him scraps.

He rode me and I raised my knees, forcing him deeper, pretending the steel in his blue eyes didn't cut. The faster I moved, the harder he thrust. I was close. So unbelievably *close*. I kneaded his shoulders and arched my back, our gazes connected. One last stroke was all it took.

Light danced behind my eyes, an endless parade of explosions rocking my core. I clenched around him and bit his shoulder to muffle my cries, both of us coming together.

There was no doubt Jimmy and his six orgasms were fact not fable, and sleeping with him again would be dangerous.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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JIMMY

No fucking condom. Not sure what I was thinking, letting that go down. Following Rachel's rule and sleeping with her, no strings attached, had the potential to mess me up. Doing it bare pulled the rug from under me.

I stilled, breathing hard, all that heat and wetness surrounding me. I ached for another round, but Rachel turned in on herself, wrenching her gaze away. For a moment, she'd been with me. Feeling our connection. There was no hiding the emotion in her big, brown eyes. Then it was gone.

"So, wow," she said. "That was pretty unreal." She slipped out from under me, pushing me to the side, when all I wanted was to pull her closer. "And that head," she went on, a regular Chatty Cathy, "you certainly know what you're doing down there. Since we're in agreement, and I was sober for the fireworks, we don't have to do this again. But it was fun. The next girl you're with will be very lucky." She gathered her jeans and underwear, holding them over her body. Then she bit her lip. "Do you have a T-shirt I could borrow? My blouse didn't survive intact."

Neither had my heart. Still, if she wanted to pretend we hadn't shared something intense, I'd play along. I'd promised her as much. It didn't mean I had to make it easy.

I strode to my dresser, naked, and pulled out a gray T-shirt. I sauntered toward her and held out my offering, but when she

reached for it, I tugged it away. “You sure you want to leave? I was just getting started.”

Her gaze dropped to my dick, and she licked her lips. “Yeah, no. Probably best if I go. I have an early shift at the gym, and I like to be punctual. Get there early, actually.”

“I could wake you up. I’m really good at wake ups.” I hid the T-shirt behind my back, and her focus stayed on my dick. “I also make killer pancakes.”

Her determination wavered. “Your cock?”

I squinted at her. “My cock?”

She waved a frantic hand as she blushed. “*Cook*. You *cook*. Not your cock. Jesus. I just can’t picture you *cooking*.” She pursed her lips and reached around me, snatching the shirt from my hands.

“Like a five star chef,” I said. “Spent time at a restaurant in Italy. I make pasta from scratch.”

Ignoring me, she marched into my bathroom and slammed the door, but I shouted, “I often cook naked, so you can still look at my cock.”

“Such a comedian,” she called.

I chuckled and pulled on a pair of sweats. I should have stayed pissed, frustrated that her fears drove her actions, but I had my own demons to slay. A woman like Rachel deserved a man willing to risk things for her. A man with a future, and I’d had one, once upon a time. I’d had a winery and would have been able to offer her everything. If I wanted Rachel, I needed to get my shit together.

The sooner I forced my family to fix their wines, the sooner I could move on. If their deceit came to light down the road, it could hurt me. Tarnish my reputation and prevent me from returning to the wine world. This way it was under my control. I’d give my real name at the final round, claim I’d just learned of the fraud, and let the drama unfold. If it happened by my hand, I’d rise above the scandal. Distance myself from it until the mess blew over.

Find some peace.

But queasiness clogged my throat, those grapevines tied to who I was, at my core.

My grandfather and I had tended them. Gave them life. When he'd started our winery, he'd struggled to make ends meet. If someone gave him a sob story about their money woes, he'd practically give his wine away. If customers claimed they'd fallen on tough times, he'd tell them to pay him in a week or a month, but the money never came. My father took over the operation and called him a fool. I called him smart and generous and loving.

Destroying the vines, even by reputation, was akin to destroying my grandfather's memory, killing a piece of myself. But I was floundering, my options always circling back to my plan, a way to forget the cruel things my father had said to me. To forget that my family had put me in this position.

Until that time, better to focus on Rachel.

Our next sommelier session was in two days, but I'd wager my Harley she'd text before then. I looked for her purse in the living room. I fished out her phone and changed my name to *Eight* in her contact list, chuckling to myself.

Seconds later, she hurried into the room, my paint-stained T-shirt hanging over her jeans. She snatched up her purse, but hesitated. "I just want to make sure things will be fine on Tuesday. I don't want it to be weird."

"It won't be weird."

"Okay. Good. Thanks."

"Especially since we'll be doing this again."

She fisted her hands. "It's not a good idea."

I crossed my arms and leaned against my couch. "It's a brilliant idea."

"Jimmy, you promised this was casual."

“I didn’t propose marriage. I just suggested you’d be so desperate to fuck me again you’d be begging for another round. So it won’t be weird. Sitting in Crush’s cellar, imagining me taking you from behind, will be fun. Don’t you think?”

Her slender fingers drifted to her neck. She stared at my bare chest. “Maybe...”

“Definitely?”

“God, you’re annoying.” She hurried toward the door.

“I aim to please. And Ray,” I said, as she was one step out, “I changed my name in your phone. Thought you should know. Don’t want you freaking out when you can’t find my number.”

“I won’t be using it.”

“You will.”

Her breathing escalated, a deep rose coloring her cheeks. Like at the bar, her brown eyes went hazy, everything about her telling me she wanted this, too. Then she blurted, “I have to go,” and left.

Thirty minutes later, my cell buzzed with a text.

Rachel: You’re coming over tomorrow.

I nearly fist-pumped.

Me: Sure thing, Sunshine.

My phone buzzed again, my grin widening as I checked it, but the name that popped up had me scratching my head. *Owen Phillips*? I hadn’t seen Owen since we’d played soccer in high school, the fucker always one move ahead of me—his passing slightly stronger, his ball handling a notch better. Last I heard, he was working at some Washington D.C. finance firm, married and living the life. I hadn’t seen him in twelve years.

Owen: Got your number from your folks, he texted. Just moved back to San Fran. Wanna grab a beer sometime?

After Rachel's quick turnaround, Owen's message brightened my mood further. It was nice to smile again, to think about a future that didn't involve me alone in my shell of an apartment. Moving around Rachel in a kitchen, flour on my hands, her hips brushing mine, sounded pretty fucking good. Having a drink with an old buddy was appealing, too.

Me: Name the time.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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RACHEL

Jimmy had been a relentless flirt all week. We'd spent three nights at his place and three at mine, always naked, always with him asking for a sleepover, always with me saying no. He'd then ask for dinner, and I'd say no. He'd ask for a movie night, a walk, an *ice cream date*...and I'd decline. I'd remind myself he was just a fling, a portal to my other dimensions. I'd also given us a time limit.

At the end of the sommelier contest, we'd be done.

My insistence on keeping us casual didn't stop his flirtatiousness. Our contest group had thinned after recent eliminations, so our corner had become even more remote. The man took advantage. Today's service component involved us decanting wines in pairs. As I poured his glass (*expertly*), he said, "I can see down your top."

He was one move shy from getting voted off the island.

Still, I didn't botch the decanting, and the Chardonnay tasting went smoothly. I swished the wines around my mouth, taking time to note the layers. *Pineapple. Banana. Buttered toast.* If I did as well as I thought, I'd be one step closer to the finals, winning the contest, and never seeing Jimmy again.

My stomach curdled, but I wasn't sure if it was the prospect of securing the job or losing Jimmy that soured my insides.

As we waited for the last few contestants to finish, Bad Boy's hands roamed freely, copping feels at random, like he was my boyfriend.

"Touch my thigh again," I said, "and I'll purple nurple you."

"Touch your thigh like this?" He pressed his leg to mine, even that bit of contact echoing along my skin. "Or like this?" His fingers traced a path up my pants' inner seam, stopping a millimeter short of his goal.

I slapped his hand away. "I told you. Save it for the bedroom."

Or the bathroom. The floor. The couch. Any available surface.

After another triple-O (Olympic Oral Orgasm), we'd had sex twice last night—once against my wall, then with me sitting on my stove. I sent him packing afterward with a smile and a thanks, like he'd stopped by to fix a leaky faucet. It was a game. One he allowed me to play.

He'd caught me staring at him enough to know more than lust turned my eyes into swoony pools of mush. I was falling for him. I wanted to open up, eat ice cream with him and walk hand-in-hand. I wished I wasn't so afraid of his past and my mother's reaction to him. Wished my father were here to meet Jimmy and predict if he would hurt me or love me, like he had with Gabe.

But I was on my own.

"That puts a wrench in my plans," he said.

"What plans?" A hint at something alluring, and I was putty in his hands.

"I bought some cheese and pâté and was planning a ride to Napa on Friday. Find a secluded spot to enjoy the day. Guess I'll have to ask someone else." He focused on April across the room, and I tried to burst her head with my mind.

She was blond, like his ex. She was curvy, too. Pink lips, sexy wrap dress, high heels. She was sweet, but often glanced

at Jimmy, probably fantasizing about slumming it. I frowned, hating that I'd been doing the same. Using him.

But dammit, his jealousy plan worked. "If you ask someone else, I will pull out your piercings with my teeth."

"Go with me, Ray." His deep voice melted into honey. "Let me take you on a date. Tour the valley together. Have some fun. I make a killer picnic."

He also made a killer sales pitch. The idea of lounging in the grass, wine sipped, the sun on our skin was too tempting to decline. "I *will* go, but I haven't decided if it's a date yet."

He slid his hand back between my legs. "Anything I can do to convince you?" I was too turned on to reply, so he added, "In case you were wondering, I changed my name in your phone again."

If my calculations were correct, he'd be listed as *Twenty-seven*. My mouth dried like I'd sucked a bushel of grape skins. "If you don't move your hand, I'll have to switch seats." I wasn't sure if I wanted him to move it away or move it... *around*. My ability to concentrate was nose-diving.

"Where will you sit? Next to the Schnozinator? Who, by the way, is killing it. If he keeps acing the exercises, you won't be in the finals."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"What makes you think you'll beat me?"

He released my thigh and raked his hand through his hair, the dark strands falling across his forehead. "I'm a Master Sommelier, Ray."

Come a-fucking-gain? My jaw nearly hit the floor, any hope for winning the contest out the window. Becoming a Sommelier was a hard-earned title. Becoming a *Master* Sommelier was as likely as sprouting wings. People invested years studying viticulture, perfecting their palates, and considered passing akin to being knighted. Less than three

hundred people in the *world* could list that credential on their résumé. And Jimmy was one of them?

The cool, damp air thickened in my throat, the wines lining the walls taunting me, telling me I was an imposter. Becoming a sommelier for three restaurants, *without experience*, was a joke. A recent article had said as much. It blasted the Adriano brothers for turning this contest into a circus. Consider me the acrobat swinging without a net. The Nose would for sure make it to the end and, apparently, so would Jimmy.

My landing wouldn't be pretty.

“Hey.” Jimmy leaned in front of me and ran his hand along my back. “You okay?”

“I shouldn't be here.”

“Says who?”

“Says me. And why are you even in this contest? Why the hell would a Master Somm take part in such a farce?”

The knowledge still floored me. We'd explored each other's bodies, had been sweaty and vulnerable in each other's arms, but he'd neglected to mention he'd earned his title.

Resentment surfaced. Not that I had the right to be mad. I was the one who'd forced our relationship into the casual zone. A classification up for reassessment. I wanted to learn where he'd gone to school or if he preferred mustard or mayonnaise, reading or watching movies. I'd kept him at arm's length, a self-imposed distance, but denying my curiosity was getting harder.

The gray-blue lines of his plaid shirt reflected his eyes. He blinked repeatedly, worry crinkling his forehead. “Because I knew you'd be here?”

I laughed, but he'd have to do better than that. “Seriously. I don't get it.”

His hand was still on my back, his thumb rubbing the same spot. Like he was stuck in a thought pattern. His focus dropped to the floor, seconds dragging into minutes. Then, “The past two years have been about starting fresh. I didn't want to do

anything related to the old me and my family. I'd avoided wine until now, but when I read about the contest, I realized I missed it. It sounded fun. Just like being around you made me realize I missed having someone in my life."

His honesty struck a match behind my breastbone, ribbons of heat tickling my ribs. *He wants me to be his someone.* If I gave in, he could answer all my unasked questions. I could stop lying awake, pretending he was at my side, holding me. Nights had never been so long, the days leading to our sexcapades tortuous. I kept thinking I'd kick my infatuation, sure this wasn't the man I should date. I was existing on slice after slice of denial pie.

Unable to address my flurry of emotion, I focused on his absurd claim. "You probably studied countless hours to pass the Master's exam, and you're doing this because it's fun?"

He shrugged. *Shrugged*, like it was nothing.

Unlike him, I didn't have choices. If I lost, I didn't have a fancy title that would allow me to write my own ticket at top restaurants and wineries. All I had was a drawer full of diplomas I'd like to burn, and a future job talking to dead people. I was destined to fail.

He nudged my knee with his. "I'd like to make it to the final round, but we could always break into a lab and spike the Schnozinator's water with a flu strain. If we clog that nose before the last week, you'll be golden." When I didn't smile, he dropped his voice. "You're good at this, Ray. *Great.* Wine is in your blood. If you don't win, we can figure something out."

My heart skipped. *We.* He'd called us we. I wanted to wrap that word around my shoulders and nuzzle into its comfort. I wanted him, and us, and I was getting tired of my fear. Tired of floundering, my choices too often a reflection of those around me.

I faced him, our lips too close to be decent. "Thank you. I'm looking forward to Napa."

He leaned back, taking in my face as though I'd offered him my kidney. "Glad to hear it. And that piercing threat? You can tug on them all you want."

Such a bad boy.



Although I'd worked the morning at the gym, I hadn't had a chance to exercise, so I left Jimmy and his dirty mouth to meet the girls. We'd been working out together for years. Or more specifically, I'd do basic exercises while Gwen would lift weights heavier than my body, and Ainsley would do eyelash reps, batting her mascara-laden lashes.

Grunting, Gwen dropped her barbell. "Ainsley, will you pass my water?"

"I could use my towel, too." I placed my eight-pound weights next to Gwen's bar, like a pea beside a pumpkin.

Ainsley fixed her ponytail. "When did I become the errand girl?"

Gwen blinked at Ainsley's sports bra and leggings, not a drop of sweat marring the hot pink ensemble. "If you actually worked out, we wouldn't use you as our gofer."

Ainsley gawked and flung her arm toward the back wall. "I did the leg machine. I could crack a walnut with my thighs. And anyway, someone has to keep watch. There are dodgy guys here."

The weight room was usually bustling with meatheads flexing for the mirrors. Not tonight. More women than men were working up a sweat, the few guys ignoring us. One of them dropped a weight, and the clang vibrated through the room. "I think you're waiting for yoga boy," I said.

She tossed my towel at my face. "*Emmett* isn't a boy. He's a specimen of manly perfection."

Gwen sucked back water. "Who doesn't know you exist?"

Ainsley swatted the air. "He's playing hard to get."

“More like you’re dying to get him hard,” I replied.

She fanned her face. “You have no idea. Have you seen him with his shirt off? The guy makes Chris Evans look like the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man.”

I rubbed my towel over my forehead, then used it to flick Gwen’s butt. We were both in capri leggings and fitted tanks—mine black, hers splashed with a CrossFit logo. We’d both worked out for an hour. Somehow her loose hair had that sexy, disheveled look, while my lifeless ponytail was plastered to my sweaty neck.

“It’s smoothie time,” I said. “Let’s call it a night.”

Gwen checked her watch. The thing was some minicomputer that calculated her heartrate and steps taken... and probably the number of times she blinked. “I’d like to do another round of cardio. I’ll meet you after.”

I put away my weights, then Ainsley and I ordered smoothies and sat in our usual spot—one of three tables facing the cardio room. Towels were strewn by the treadmills, the disinfectant spray bottles half empty. There would be lots of work tomorrow.

Good thing I had those college degrees!

“I read an article about your contest,” Ainsley said, “by some restaurant critic blasting the thing, saying it’s nothing more than a lame attempt to increase business.”

I sucked my straw, blueberry and banana swirling on my tongue. “I read it, and it totally is. I’m not even sure what I’m doing there. Actually”—I pressed my wrists to my cup, hoping to cool down—“I know exactly why I’m there. It’s a delay tactic.”

She adjusted her sports bra. “I don’t follow.”

Since Jimmy’s Master Sommelier revelation, I’d been stewing over the contest and my place in it. Realizing I wouldn’t win didn’t upset me as much as I’d imagined. Frustration weighed me down, but not the way it had on impact. I’d jumped on this opportunity because I’d quit yet

another job and had no clue where to turn my focus. With the birthday wish taunting me, wine seemed like the right move.

But the thought of winning, as hopeless as it was, had me breaking out in hives. It wasn't what I wanted, but that left me at ground zero, sifting through the internet for inspiration, *again*.

"I'm in a holding pattern," I said. "My mother has pushed me forever to work for my uncle's funeral home, and I'm running out of options. I'm not sure this sommelier position is for me, but if I hang on until the end, she'll back off. That gives me a month to figure something out."

"And to flirt with Jimmy?"

The heat flushing my chest had me placing my smoothie against my neck. "I've fallen hard for him. I still question things, thinking I'm nuts to pursue him, but my excuses are drying up."

Ainsley pushed her straw around. "Is he a player?"

"I don't think so." A player wouldn't own his discomfort when confronting an ex. He'd shared bits about his family, had admitted the contest was a way for him to ease back into the land of the living. As was dating me. He'd never been anything but honest.

"Are you attracted to him?" she asked.

"Is that a real question?"

She smirked. "Do you have fun with him? Does he make you laugh? Do you think about him when he's not around?"

I bit my lip, and the truth spilled out. "Yes. Yes. And all the time."

"Then stop worrying about the rest. Enjoy him. Open up. I bet your mother will surprise you. She might love him."

I stared at her, wide eyed.

"You're right," she said. "She'll hate him. But it doesn't matter. The only one who has to live with him is you."

That sent my mind to Jimmy and me sharing an apartment—something small and tasteful, warmer than his, with new quotes on the wall. Sayings about love conquering all and opposites attracting. I'd hang my pencil skirts next to his ripped jeans, and we'd cuddle on the couch, wine in hand, talking about our days. Days that hopefully wouldn't include discussing the benefits of open versus closed caskets. I blinked the vignette away.

Unless I got over myself, that daydream would never happen.

Ainsley fiddled with her straw, a stirring motion that sloshed her kale smoothie. "Do you ever think about our birthday? About the blackout after our wish?"

More than I cared to admit. "Sometimes. It was pretty nuts."

Her stirring sped up. "It's just, I've thought about it lots. My wish was a big one, something that's been on my mind. I don't believe in ghosts or mind reading or fortune tellers, but I felt"—she sighed—"something when it happened. Was it just me?"

The air had swelled that night, all right. My arms had prickled, too. I'd dredged up the memory countless times but hadn't voiced my whacky belief that bigger things were at play. The possibility that my father had somehow orchestrated the encounter. Just thinking it made my heart hammer faster than when on the stepmill. "No. It wasn't just you. I don't want to say my wish out loud, and I don't want to hear yours, but part of me thinks if we fulfill our resolutions, the rest of our lives will fall into place. Like a domino effect."

My pulse didn't slow, but calm descended. Hearing I wasn't alone reinforced my resolve. I *had* to find the right career. Had to move heaven and earth to make it happen. Fighting for something better could give me the confidence to figure out this Jimmy situation. It would help me escape my mother's shadow. If I found *The Job*.

As I sipped the last of my smoothie, both of us lost in our thoughts, an old man stepped onto a treadmill and stood there,

stabbing at the buttons. Even from behind, I could tell it was my favorite grumpy gym member, and I grinned. At least he hadn't given up.

"I have to help a guest," I told Ainsley. "I'll catch up with you later."

She barely acknowledged me, and I paused. Ainsley didn't get down and moody; she got angry and sarcastic. I hesitated, but letting 911 drown in his frustrations could cause him to quit exercising. Next time we were out, I'd ask Ainsley what was up.

After giving her shoulder a squeeze, I approached the old man slowly, worried I'd scare him off. His grumbling had other guests casting frowns his way. I tipped my head into his view. "Looks like the machine is acting up again."

He stabbed his index finger some more, hitting every button on the screen. "It is broken."

I could have run through the same routine, unplugging and plugging in the treadmill, but that wouldn't help him the next time he showed up. I did the next best thing. I hopped on the machine beside his and hovered my finger over the program key. "It could be broken, or maybe it's jammed. I just did a workout with my friends, and I was planning on finishing with a cooldown. So I'll just hit the Start button here"—I made a show of pressing the middle button—"and walk for a bit, until my heartrate slows."

He side-eyed me, scrunching his large nose as my walk began. "I am not an idiot," he said abruptly. "I was waiting."

Waiting, my ass. But he copied me. He hit the Start button, lifting his feet like last time, and I bit back my grin. The crotchety man was too cute.

Exaggerated in my movements, I pressed the upward arrow, increasing my speed. 911 grumbled under his breath, but followed suit. Next I raised the incline a notch. His treadmill mirrored mine. I picked up speed. As did he. A few minutes later, I brought the platform level with the ground, and

he copied my move. Since he hadn't offered his name last time, I tried again. "I'm Rachel, in case you didn't remember."

"I am not senile."

His tone was stiff and formal, the tiniest accent under his tongue. That didn't stop me. "Do you have a name? In my mind, I keep calling you 911. So if you have a name that *isn't* 911, I'd love to hear it."

He pressed the arrow key (on his own!), but didn't acknowledge me. A minute later, he said, "George."

*Houston, we have progress.* "Well, George, it's nice to have someone to chat with while working out. Helps pass the time."

He stomped along, his Frankenstein impression spot on. "You are too skinny. Women these days are always too skinny. You shouldn't exercise so much."

My cackle escaped, the birdlike squawk ricocheting off the walls, and I clamped my jaw shut. It was my nervous laugh, the kind that hid the emotion clawing at my throat. My mother had often said I was too skinny. Then my father would jump in and tell me Marilyn Monroe's curves may have driven a generation of men wild, but Twiggy had decorated every high school locker in the sixties. He'd said I was exactly as I was meant to be. He had been a one man pep rally.

And I missed him.

I swung my arms faster, needing to keep George talking, moving. Pumping his heart. Keep mine from shriveling. "I exercise to keep healthy, not lose weight. Looks to me like *you* could stand to slim down." I looked pointedly at his belly, the solid bulge stretching his white T-shirt and keeping his sweatpants from circling his waist.

He tried to stop marching, but the platform didn't slow, sending him jogging to catch his stride. He slowed and shot me a look. "My wife is an excellent cook."

"Must be nice. Do you have kids? Grandkids?"

His breathing seemed labored, that quick run pumping his lungs too hard. I slowed my treadmill, hoping he'd do the same. He did and took a few cleansing breaths. "I have one son," he said.

He didn't elaborate, but talking kept him exercising. The next best option was to blabber about myself. "I have a brother. And a dog. Our family's dog, actually. Stanley. She's part schnauzer, part poodle, and all adorable."

His mustache twitched. "She?"

"She has a beard, white fur on her muzzle. Stanley suits her."

He grunted.

My mother had bought me our schnoodle when my father died, hoping the furry friend would lift my twenty-two-year-old heart. When I'd moved out, I made her keep him. *Because I don't have room*, I'd told her. *Because she needs the company*, I'd thought.

Mom pretended it was a burden.

I loved Stanley, though, and didn't trust people who wrinkled their noses at dogs. I'd bet Jimmy loved animals, too. He probably sponsored the Humane Society and fostered iguanas, had a farm for injured llamas. Before today, while fighting our connection, I would have told myself he hated cats and dogs and spent his free time kicking puppies. I'd have invented stories, pathetic attempts to reverse my growing affection for him. Anything to forget the way he'd cupped my cheek one night, looked into my eyes, and said he'd dream about me.

I had to find the strength to mute my father's last words and trust my own judgment. Stop revolving my life around my mother's preferences, worried she'd cut me off again for dating the wrong guy.

I snuck a glance at George. What was left of his gray hair had frizzed up, giving him that old-and-wise look. "So... George," I ventured tentatively, "if your son dated a girl you

didn't like, like *really* didn't like, but he seemed happy, would you be upset?"

As he was about to answer, he stubbed a toe and tripped over his feet. I jumped off my treadmill and slammed my palm onto his Stop button. 911 wouldn't eat dirt on my watch. He gripped the handrails until his erratic breaths evened out. His eyes were glassy, though, the exertion too much.

"Maybe you should walk slowly awhile."

He nodded, his hand still over his heart. He pressed Start on his own and resumed a leisurely gait. I returned to my treadmill, walking beside him, ensuring he was okay.

I assumed my question had been forgotten, but a moment later, he said, "Children are impulsive. They do not think ahead. As parents, we must be firm. If my boy dated the wrong girl, they would not be welcome in my home."

It was my turn to stumble over my feet, his harshness tripping me up. My hackles rose, along with my indignation. "That's ridiculous."

He tutted me. "Lust can be confused for love." Then, although I'd asked a theoretical question, George added, "This man in your life may not be what he seems."

Our conversation had veered from hypothetical into *oh hell no* territory. "The guy, for your information, is one of the most caring, thoughtful people I've met. He's smart and funny, and I'd be lucky to have him, even if my mother disagrees." My vehemence surprised me, and part of me wanted to slap George for being so old-fashioned and stubborn, but I'd asked his opinion.

He grimaced, probably unsure why I was gifting him with too much information, but a drum pounded in my chest, the tune confirming my decision. My reaction to George's overprotective, and frankly *dictatorial*, comment had been nothing but pure emotion. The heart of my heart. And my heart wanted Jimmy.

On the outside, Jimmy may have read *tabloid*, scandalous and tempting, provocative but lacking substance. Inside he

was all romance novel, thick with sweet words and sweeter kisses, tortured hero and all. He irritated me, but in that adorable *I want to jump your bones* way, and my need to defend his honor to this crotchety old man surprised me in its ferocity. Jimmy and I laughed together, and our chemistry was off the charts. My smile grew, my list of things I loved about Jimmy growing with it, topped off with the most important point: he'd always been honest with me.

My father's final voice message still looped in my mind, but Jimmy wasn't Gabe. He may not have been the man I'd imagined for my future, and my mother might stroke out at the sight of him, but pretending I could keep away was a full-time job. Another career I was thinking of quitting. Our Napa Valley trip was in two days. That gave me forty-eight hours to buy something cute (that didn't belong in an ensemble), and figure out the best way to tell Bad Boy I was ready to claim him.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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JIMMY

Gravel kicked under my tires and wind blasted my face as I leaned my bike into a turn. The speed and freedom when riding always helped me zone out. I'd forget the onslaught of messages from my mother, the winery I no longer called mine. I'd lose the chip on my shoulder and be one with my Harley. Adding Rachel to the equation took the experience to another level.

Instead of seeking oblivion, her presence anchored me. Her thighs bracketed mine, her hands pressed to my abs. My senses flared in response. I could practically taste the birth of new grapes seeking the sun, almost *feel* the rows of vines beneath my hand, rough leaves dragging along my fingers.

Most of all, I felt Rachel—each shift of her hips and squeeze of her arms. Her heat seeping through my leather jacket. I could have driven until the world dropped from our feet.

Except Rachel yelled, “*Stop.*”

We'd just turned down a dirt path, and I braked fast, the two of us jolting forward. “You okay?” I called over the motor.

“I want to drive.”

I killed the engine and leaned my bike on its stand, but neither of us moved. The simmering motor gave way to the buzzing hum of nature, a tune I hadn't heard in ages. I liked

living in the city. Great food. Cool hangouts. The hustle and bustle always offered something new. But I was still a country boy at heart and returning here was bittersweet. It brought bad memories with the good, but with Rachel around, I had less room for the hate.

She pressed her head to my back, and I closed my eyes as more warmth spread through my limbs, filling me up. Crowding out the things that normally wound me up. I didn't question why I'd fallen for her so fast, didn't care to understand the how or when of it. I was a thirsty man desperate for a drink, and she was a woman parched for danger.

I threaded our fingers and kissed the back of her hand. "You sure you can handle all this power between your legs?"

The little minx extricated her hand and dragged it down my chest and abs. She slowed over my dick, gave it a squeeze, then splayed her fingers over the motorcycle seat. She slapped the leather. "I think I'll manage."

I groaned.

When the heat fisting my balls ebbed, I kicked my leg over the seat and stood. "You ever driven a bike before?"

She shook her head. "Only been on the back. But I've always wanted to."

She was exploring her deeper urges, sampling which itches needed to be scratched, and she trusted me to help her. "Rules are as follows: you go in a straight line. No fancy spins or turns. Just a smooth ride forward. Sound good?"

She bounced on the seat. "Perfect."

Keeping the kickstand down, I pointed out the foot pegs, shifter, clutch, throttle, and brakes. Her attention was rapt. If I had to guess, I'd say her pulse was buzzing louder than a jet plane. Mine had on my first ride. When getting my first piercing, too. That first tattoo. Each experience had been thrilling, and I was gifting this to her.

She shifted her weight, settling on the seat and gripping the handlebars. "I think I'm ready."

I raised the kickstand, making sure she was steady before letting go. “Keep your fingers on the clutch,” I reminded her. “Release it slowly, get the bike rolling, then apply the throttle.”

Her helmet bobbed as she nodded. “Got it.”

She turned on the engine, my beast of chrome and metal humming below her. Sexy as hell. Then she released the clutch. She squealed as she rolled forward, but promptly jolted to a stop. She teetered before finding balance. “Did I break it?”

*Just my heart*, I almost said, unsure why my head had gone there. A place it had been visiting more often these days. Each time she’d snubbed a date request, it stung a little more. Her fear may have shone through each rebuke, but every minute with her had me sinking deeper. Eventually, getting out would be a bitch.

“Everyone stalls out when they start,” I said. “You released the clutch too fast. Slow and steady wins the race.” Exactly how I’d been pursuing her, but my heart was bound to stall, too. Everything with her was moves and counter moves. Admissions of feelings by me lowered her defenses. Give her too much time to think, and her walls shot back up. The picnic was my grand master plan, one I hoped pushed us from fuck buddies to fuck *couple*.

She set her jaw and tightened her grip. “Let’s try again.”

“Slow,” I repeated. “Wait for the sweet spot, then the throttle.”

She was in the zone, body taut, her posture pitched forward. The engine thundered to life. She waited a beat, long enough for me to second guess letting her drive. Motorcycles were dangerous. One wrong move, and she could end up with serious road rash, or worse. Maybe this was a bad idea.

But she was gliding along the dirt path, past the point of me stopping her. The throttle roared. The sound set up residence in my chest, vibrating through me. When the bike shot forward, I pictured her losing control, her slim body

pinned under all that crushing weight. Panic pushed my legs into a run. *She better not fucking fall.*

She rode a perfect straight line.

Breathless, I reached her as she stopped. Her grin hit me like a blast of fireworks. “That was *unreal*.”

I gripped the handlebar and killed the engine. Too bad I couldn’t silence the hammer pummeling my chest. “You’re a quick study, but I’d feel better if you had some lessons before your next ride.”

Unconcerned, she thrust her arms into the air. “I am such a rebel.”

An adorable rebel. “That you are. Now scoot back. We have a picnic to enjoy.”

I parked my bike farther down the path, grabbed my backpack and blanket, and guided Rachel to a shaded area protected by tall grasses and a towering willow tree. Growing up, my brother and I had hiked these mountains and explored the creeks and rivers, branches in hand, as we waged war for our kingdom. Kings of the land. It made for quite the wonderland as kids, but I also found hideaways, secret places I’d keep to myself. Like the secluded pond ahead of us.

Rachel shrugged off her jean jacket and peeled off the leggings she’d worn for the ride, practically skipping to the water’s edge. She kneeled down and dipped her fingers in. No pretense. No worry about muddying her sandals. The yellow straps of her sundress were nothing but strings, the loose fabric shifting over her tanned skin. Add the freckles and long hair, and she was the picture of summer.

I shook out the blanket and spread it on the grass. “Nice to see you in something other than black, gray, or white,” I said.

She grasped a handful of water and flicked it at me, missing by a mile. “Is that your version of a compliment?”

“No. It was an observation. If I wanted to pay you a compliment, I’d tell you you’re the most genuine woman I’ve ever known. I also might add that your beauty makes it hard to breathe.”

Her hand stilled in the water, the warm air shifting between us. “That was an improvement.”

“Did you want me to go on?”

She bit her lip and nodded. I could have continued for hours. Mentioned how her laugh filled my empty apartment, how her freckled curves brought me to my knees, how she was kind, and her impressive wine knowledge made me feel like she shared a connection to my happiest childhood memories. Instead I walked over and crouched in front of her, the birds, the frogs, the crickets all singing her praises. “You, Ray, make me feel alive for the first time in ages.”

A small squeak escaped her lips, her brown eyes a mirror of the sparkling pond.

Damn if it wasn't true. She also made me want to be better. Admitting I was a Master Sommelier and wasn't using my skills had coated my gut in inadequacy. I may have chosen my clothing and tattoos and piercings, but I could do a hell of a lot better than working at Rudy's Tavern. For myself, sure. If someone like Rachel were in my life, I'd do it for her, too. Be proud of my work. Proud to be her man.

Before everything went to shit, I'd toyed with the idea of organizing larger events for the area, shining lights on smaller wineries eking by. I could still do it.

*After* I forced the winery carrying my name to right its wrongs.

I brushed her hair from her face and tucked it behind her ear, stealing a slow kiss. Just a taste. An *amuse-bouche* before the main course. “Now get your ass over to the blanket, so I can lay my bounty at your feet.”

“Bossy, aren't you?”

“You love it.”

She didn't admit it, but she didn't disagree. A hint of progress.

She sat on her hip, tucking her legs and purse to the side. I spread out our feast: Manchego cheese, Castelvetro olives,

duck pâté, prosciutto, dark chocolate, sliced apples, and quince paste, all on a small wooden board. I'd wrapped two wineglasses in T-shirts, and Rachel unrolled them as I lifted a surprise from my bag. Nestled in a cooler sleeve was the 2010 Marcassin Chardonnay—perfection in a bottle.

When Rachel saw the label, she lowered the glasses and yanked it from my grasp, reading it as though it were a bible. “Would it be wrong to press this to my breasts?”

This woman was too much. “Don't let me stop you.”

She actually smothered it between her tits, ecstasy on her face. Sometimes a guy just wished he were a bottle.

“I don't want to open it.” She held it at a distance, her expression still dreamy. “Can I take it home and spend some time with it? Maybe open it in a week or two?”

“It's wine, Ray, not a date. You don't need to buy it dinner before popping its cork. Wine is meant to be enjoyed.”

“But”—she glanced at me, then down at her dress—“I should have worn something celebration worthy. This wine deserves black tie.”

I had on my motorcycle boots, ripped jeans, and a faded Rolling Stones T-shirt. Most people opening a Marcassin would be in slacks or a tux, piano playing in the background, a five-star meal about to be served. But this? The rustle of the willow branches, Rachel's sundress, the glow of her freckled cheeks—it put that snobbish shit to shame. Instead of replying, I leaned back and yanked off my boots, tossing them and my socks to the side. Rachel smiled and kicked off her sandals.

I stood and helped her up, then led us to the grass. “Feel that?”

She wiggled her toes. “What?”

I flexed my feet, letting the blades wedge between my toes, cool and fresh. “*Life*. Everything out here is alive. Not just the birds and insects. The grass, too. How often do you let yourself slow down and feel it on your skin? Remember what it was like to play as a kid, stains on your pants, mud under your fingernails. We didn't care, back then. Having fun was

more important than wearing the right thing or driving the right car. As far as I'm concerned, being out here *is* a celebration."

She stepped closer, until her toes covered mine. "Then let's celebrate."

I cupped her cheeks, feeling the grass below me, the blue sky above, Rachel in my hands. "Sounds like a plan."

I didn't kiss her. One more touch and I'd be hiking up her dress and pressing her back into a tree. I slapped her ass instead. She jumped, rubbing her bottom with a playful scowl. We sat back down, and I picked up the Chardonnay, only to realize I'd forgotten the most important thing. "Shit."

Rachel froze. "What?"

"No corkscrew."

She smirked. "Well, *Master Sommelier*, it's a good thing you brought me along." Shifting on her hip, she tipped over her purse, spilling its contents onto the blanket.

How everything had fit inside was a mystery. "Remind me to bring you if I get stuck on a deserted island."

She sifted through pepper spray, a few tubes of cream, small scissors, tape, paper, a whistle, Band-Aids, thread and a needle, mini flashlight, batteries, Advil...

I'd never understand the relationship between a woman and her purse.

I held up what looked like a bell. "Is this in case you lose your voice, the whistle breaks, and you need to hail a cab?"

She cackled, sharp and abrupt, the sound infectious as always. "It's a bear bell. You know, in case grizzlies invade San Francisco and I need to ward them off. Always best to be prepared."

When I chuckled, she added, "It's my mother's fault. She gives me all this stuff, worried I'll rip a skirt and have to repair it, or that I'll get kidnapped. *Or* aliens might land, and we'll discover they can be killed with cortisone cream." She held up three tubes.

“Seems plausible,” I said drily. “But why carry it around? Just tell her you don’t need the stuff.”

She pulled a Swiss Army knife from the pile and played with the attachments, opening and closing the corkscrew. “I know it’s silly. I’m twenty-seven. I shouldn’t do what my mother says or care what she thinks. It’s just, family’s important to me. Since my dad died, my mother’s anxiety has gone a bit nuts. If carrying this crap calms her, what’s the harm?” She passed me the knife, tossed her phone next to mine, and re-stuffed her purse.

“It’s nice that you care about her,” I said.

It’s also why I’d lied to her the other day.

I busied myself cutting the foil and twisting the corkscrew, guilt coiling with the movement. I shouldn’t have lied to Rachel, but if I’d told her the reason I’d joined the contest was to leak my family’s deceit, an act that would sabotage their winery, she’d have shut me down. Family was everything to her. I’d have to tell her eventually. If she stopped fighting our pull and things moved forward, there couldn’t be secrets. But she’d already been searching for excuses to cut me off. No point handing her the knife.

The cork eased out with a quiet *pop*, and Rachel clapped like a kid about to inhale cupcakes. She held out the glasses, and the golden liquid sloshed up the sides as I poured.

I loved the ritual of wine. The dance of man and nature—vines tended, grapes crushed, fermentation coaxing the fruit into greatness, and *this*. The moment of decision. Pass or fail.

Good, bad, or perfect.

I smelled the cork and Rachel did the same. Next we swirled the glasses, breathing in their bouquets. I didn’t want to sip mine yet. I preferred watching her lips touch the crystal, the flush of her cheeks and pleasure in her eyes as she swallowed.

“Holy shit” were the first words she managed. Then, “Like, *holy shit*. My mouth just had an orgasm.” She inhaled,

taking in the sundrenched pond and blue, blue sky. “It tastes like this place.”

I resisted the urge to taste the wine on *her* lips, instead sipping from my glass. It really was a mouthgasm. “Lemon peel,” I said, the first taste on my palate.

She took another sip and shook her head. “Lemon *meringue*.”

Always the competitor. I swished my next taste, and there, *just there*, was the candied sweetness she noted. “Apricot marmalade,” I said, then we alternated suggestions.

“Chamomile.”

“Brioche.”

“Green apple.”

“Quince.”

She scrunched her nose. “Quince? Nope. More apple than quince.”

“Shall we wager?”

She traced circles on her knee, scenting her wine periodically. “What’s on the table?”

I could have backed off, not pushed her to drop this charade and admit she was falling for me, but I was only digging myself deeper. Better to force the issue than wind up at a tattoo shop a month from now, covering the pain left in her wake. “A sleepover.”

She nearly spilled her wine. “If I’d dropped this on the blanket, it would have been grounds for murder.”

“I’d like to see that stand up in court.”

She clutched her glass to her chest. “Your house or mine?”

I picked up a square of dark chocolate and let it melt on my tongue. “I’m not picky.”

She looked at me, then at the wine, her gaze darting back and forth again. “Fine. Sleepover. My place.”

I'd have expected her to suggest mine, a location she could leave on a whim. Hers was even better. I'd make the wakeup so good she'd want to stay indoors all week.

I opened the quince spread and dipped my finger in it, bringing the jam to her mouth. "Want a lick?"

Her doe eyes flashed and she scooted closer, the board of delicacies between us. "Don't mind if I do." She parted her lips and took my finger in, rolling her tongue around as she sucked, releasing me with a drag of her teeth. And, *fuck*. My dick lengthened, jealous of my goddamn finger.

As she savored the jam, she repeated my move, dipping her finger in and placing the quince on my tongue. I groaned, the tease of her and the added sweetness sending my mind to her straddling my face and rocking her hips. I got harder. With a final lick and kiss, I released her finger. We sipped the Chardonnay next, savoring its complexity.

She huffed and dropped her head back. "You're right, of course. I taste the quince."

"I liked it better on your skin," I said.

She rolled her eyes. "I bet you did."

I poured more wine, the two of us drinking and eating, alternating bites, talking about everything and nothing. One hour passed. Then two. I admitted I sang in my school choir. She confessed her teenage love for NSYNC, complete with posters on her wall. She grilled me about my rise to Master Sommelier, and I relived every detail, another reminder I was an idiot for denying that part of myself.

"I envy you," she said.

I moved the remaining food aside and pulled her bare feet closer, the wine and conversation casting a lazy spell. "Because my life circled the drain and I work at a dive bar?"

She kicked my thigh. "*No*. Because even if you're taking a break, you know who you are. You wanted to become a Master Sommelier, and no matter the hours or how hard it was, you went after it. You had a path."

A path that had led me to a messed-up place, but she was talking about her life, not mine. “What was the job you quit, again? Before the contest?”

“Loan officer, which basically meant I was a telemarketer. Constant cold calling, trying to convince people to borrow money. It was soul sucking.”

“And before that?”

“Thai massage.”

“And before that?”

She sipped the last of her wine and placed the glass on its side. “You’ll make fun of me.”

I lay my empty glass next to hers and pulled her foot toward me. “Now I need to know.” I dug my thumbs into her arch, steady rhythm, eliciting a hum from her.

She leaned back on her hands. “I can’t tell you. It’s ridiculous.”

I released her foot. “My hands are cramping. Not sure I can continue this massage.”

She grumbled, then huffed out a breath. “Fine. Tattoo artist. I wanted to be a tattoo artist. I never followed through, but that was the plan.”

I gawked at her. Walking into a shop to find Little Miss Proper at a station, tattoo gun in hand, would have been quite the sight. “But you don’t have a stitch of ink.”

“First, get back to the massage.” She kicked my thigh, and I complied. “Second, I do have ink.”

My thumbs froze. “No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do.”

“In case you weren’t aware, Sunshine, I’ve explored every inch of your skin. If you had a tattoo, I would have seen it. Unless you got something in the past four days, in which case, you better undress right the fuck now.” Tattoo or not, getting her naked was sounding better and better. The perfect dessert.

Color bloomed on her cheeks. “It’s on my hip. When I told Gwen my new job plan, she said I couldn’t ink people without knowing how it felt. She forced me into a shop.”

My eyes roved over her, picturing the freckled skin below her yellow dress. No way did she have a tattoo. “And?”

“*And* I’d drawn an image. I mean, the only reason I’d considered tattooing as a career was because I could draw and didn’t have to do more school. So I drew this really beautiful anchor for my dad—he had a boat and loved fishing.” She smiled at the memory, a fleeting thing that squeezed my heart. “The stencil was on, the gun buzzed, but I have a pretty low pain threshold.”

“This is too good,” I said, sensing where the story was headed. I crawled over her, until she was on her back, my knees on either side of hers. I grabbed the bottom of her dress and lifted. “Keep going, Sunshine.”

Her throat bobbed in a long, slow slide. “He did one mark, and I screamed bloody murder. I flew off the table, created a scene, and ran from the shop. Gwen, the instigator, ran after me, doubled over with laughter.”

I would have paid good money to see that, but I needed my eyes on her skin. “Which side?” She pointed to her left, and I pushed up her skirt. Above her skimpy underwear a tiny mark decorated her hip, nothing more than a pinhead. “I thought this was a birthmark.”

“Nope. I ride motorcycles *and* I’m inked, like the badass I am.”

Badass and cute as hell. I gave the tattoo a kiss, then planted another one below the white lace. Then one on her inner thigh. My dick throbbed, the day nothing but an aphrodisiac. I could have slipped her underwear down and dragged my tongue up her pretty little pussy, but finding out why she was so lost was important. Rachel was important.

She shifted restlessly, and I moved up, caging her shoulders with my hands. “Why so many jobs?”

Her eyelids were heavy with lust, but she said, “Because I don’t know who I am.”

It came out softly, a whisper on the breeze. I lowered my voice, too. “You’re a girl with a wild side she’s afraid to explore, and you need wine as much you need oxygen. I’ve seen it before, the look you get when you swirl a glass, right before you take that first sip. It’s what you’re meant to do. Not some stupid contest and serving at restaurants. Being a part of the process. That’s where the magic is. Why not explore that?”

A squirrel scurried up the willow tree, its noisy chatter drawing our attention. Rachel kept her focus there. “I got into wine after my dad died. Never considered it more than a hobby. As my interest grew, I looked into it. Checked out the requirements to be a winemaker.” Her left cheek hollowed, probably from biting it. A habit when she was stressed. “It’s daunting, starting over. It would take years, and I’d probably have to move back home, when relying on myself makes me feel strong and independent.”

Her gaze drifted to my hand and up my arm, landing on my face. Her brown eyes glazed with sadness. “My parents paid for school for my brother and me, and I ask for things from time to time, but letting my mom support me now doesn’t sit well. I don’t want to go backward. And it’s like”—she wrinkled her nose as if her words scented the breeze with sourness—“each time I fail at something, I’m disappointing my dad. He had nothing and worked hard to build a life for us. He believed I’d be a success. So it’s like he’s watching me steamroll through life, shaking his head.”

This woman. So honest and so *good* and desperate to please everyone around her, gone and alive. She needed to focus on herself, though. Be the woman she was meant to be, even if it meant sucking up her pride. “Not following your dreams, for whatever reason, is the only thing that would be a failure. And not exploring yourself is criminal. For instance, when I do this”—I placed my hand on her ribs, over her dress, my thumb grazing the swell of her breast—“what are you hoping I do next?”

Pupils blown wide, she tried to wriggle lower, get my hand to move, but I held firm.

“Do you want it slow and sweet, or rough and hard?” I asked. “I could spend an hour kissing and sucking your breasts, or I could grab your *tit* and take your nipple between my teeth. Either will make me a happy man, but what do *you* want?”

The rise and fall of her chest quickened, and her throat bobbed. “I want it rough. I like when you bite. I like when you pull my hair.”

Her words spilled out, each one chasing the next, and *Jesus*. To hear her say it, ask for me to push her boundaries? That level of trust tugged at my primal instinct to call her mine. Protect her. Learn every lick and touch that would make her buck.

It also sent a punch of lust to my groin.

I nudged her knees apart, and my hips fell on hers. My erection dug into the valley between her thighs. The thrust that followed had her arching her back, and I squeezed her tit. She gasped, short and sharp, fueling my desire. All I wanted was *her*. Those incoherent sounds. To know I was taking her places she'd never been.

Leaning on an elbow, I shoved her dress above her bra, my jeans thick and rough against her lace underwear. Exactly how she liked it. I didn't unclasp her bra, didn't have the patience. Instead I tugged the cups down, and her breasts pushed up, small and perfect, light pink nipples puckered in tight buds.

I fucking loved her tits. And she loved it wild, like me. I squeezed and licked and bit and sucked, while grinding against her. Her fingers dug into my back. My thighs were on fire. She writhed under me, one hand tangling with my hair, forcing our lips together. The kiss wasn't pretty. It was need and urgency and hunger. It was the pressure of our lives and all we wanted but weren't sure we could have.

It was us.

I couldn't wait. The urge to slam into her had me undoing my belt buckle and shoving my jeans past my ass. She shimmied out of her underwear, and then I was in her, all that tight heat beckoning me closer, as though I had a home. A place in Rachel's life. Her bra was below her tits, the straps of her dress down her shoulders, my jeans at my knees. My hips slammed into hers—hard, sharp, greedy thrusts. She met me each time. I wanted her messy, letting go of her inhibitions. Taking for herself.

“God, *Jimmy*.” Her face was a display of sensual abandon, her nails on my ass, forcing me deeper.

Hell yes.

“You're an animal,” I growled. “Exactly how I like you. So fucking hot.”

An animal who pushed a hand up my shirt, found a nipple piercing, and gave it a twist. Heat shot down my spine, my orgasm building. With each thrust, I rubbed against her, pulling out far enough for my barbell to tease her opening and then slamming tight. Harder. *Rougher*. It felt too good. She felt too good. Dammit if I wasn't losing my heart to her.

The thought caught in my chest, tangled and twisted, driving my movements. She was on the brink, her pussy clamping around my cock, and I shot off like a rocket. Her spasms followed, both of us riding the wave.

Something crossed her face then, a softening of her eyes, moisture gathering in the corners. Her lips parted, like she was about to speak. Instead she swallowed, and her expression dimmed—her internal light flickering, its power source weakened.

Mine damn near blew out. If this was her closing off again, putting up her walls, it would gut me. I couldn't keep drifting with her whims. Not after today. Not after this. To me, she could never be a fling.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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### RACHEL

Jimmy walked into the forest to pee before leaving, and I was still high as a kite—the sex, the picnic, the Chardonnay. *The sex*. The conversation, too. All that school and wine talk had set my mind spinning. I'd stopped considering winemaking as an option, but here it was again, a seed planted, courage growing. The pros and cons unfolded, because of Jimmy.

He'd also unlocked Reckless Rachel in doses. Manageable pieces I could incorporate into my life. I could still feel the roar of the motorcycle under me, the perfection of Jimmy between my thighs.

If I wanted to honor myself, understand what truly made me happy, in the bedroom and out, I'd have to start here. With my bad boy. Not get nervous like I had a moment ago and chicken out from confessing my feelings. I had to forget my concerns and trust that he was ready for a relationship. No more games. No unnecessary complications. When he came back, I'd look him in the eyes and tell him I was all in. I'd take him up on every sleepover offer and add a few suggestions of my own.

I pulled on my leggings for the ride and gathered my jean jacket. As I packed up the food, my phone rang. I'd ignored my mother's calls the past two days. So jumbled with thoughts of Jimmy and my stalled career, I worried I'd let something

slip when I wasn't ready for the head-on collision. If it was her and I ignored her again, she'd slap my face on a milk carton.

I dropped to my knees and hit Talk. "Hello?"

Whoever was on the other end sucked in her breath. "Is Jimmy there?"

The female voice was sharp and strong, *not* my mother's, and unease slicked my gut. Jimmy and I both had black iPhones—the same black cases, neither of us having chosen unique ring tones—which meant this wasn't my cell. It wasn't cool to answer Jimmy's phone. It was intrusive and rude and something I'd never do. With the conversation I wanted to have, this wouldn't be a great start. If I hung up, he'd never be the wiser, and the person would think they'd dialed the wrong number.

But as I pulled the phone from my ear, the woman said, "I'm his mother, Alena. I know Jimmy doesn't want to speak with me, but he won't return my calls. I'm not sure who this is, or if there's anything you can do to help, but we've let this go on too long. We want our son back."

My breathing spiked, and I searched the trees, worried Jimmy would return any moment and catch me talking to his *freaking mother*.

Why did I answer the phone?

Or maybe I was supposed to, another twist of fate, like my father's final apology, my birthday wish, the blackout, and seeing that sommelier poster. Destiny unfolding.

By the sounds of things, Jimmy would have ignored the call, but I'd seen how lonely his life was, how hard it had been for him to sip his family's wine. I didn't know the gory details of their fight, but he hadn't moved on, and they clearly wanted to make amends.

Steeling my voice, I said, "I'm Rachel"—*his girlfriend? Fuck buddy? Play thing?*—"his friend. He's just stepped away, but I can talk to him for you, if you'd like."

She exhaled heavily. "Well, Rachel, that would be appreciated. I'm not sure how well you know my boy, but all

the Giannopoulos men are stubborn mules, my husband included. But this business has poisoned our family. I'm concerned about my husband's health. The stress is wearing him down."

My stomach cramped, the notion of Jimmy's father being unwell hitting home. If something happened to the man before they reunited, it would haunt Jimmy. My final argument with my father tortured me to this day, as did the little things—a birthday of his I'd forgotten, the dinner I'd cancelled because I wasn't in the mood. Stupid stuff, but tiny bumps became moguls, hills became mountains.

"I'll make sure he gets in touch. Or"—I searched the trees, nerves buzzing—"if you wait, I can put him on the phone."

Her answer was delayed, until, "I'll wait, but he might not want to speak with me."

I was intimately familiar with Jimmy's stubbornness, and I could only imagine his father. Even his mother's voice was a solid thing, her businesslike tone demanding my attention. But to not speak with her? After hearing his dad was unwell? It seemed preposterous.

The man in question walked from the trees, taking long strides, focus on his feet, like he was deep in thought. I hesitated. I'd have loved nothing more than to tell him I was all his, not mar our perfect day with stress, but this was important. This was family.

When he glanced my way, he frowned. "You okay?" His attention settled on the phone burning up my hand.

Sweat gathered along my spine. "I didn't mean to answer it. Our phones were next to each other, and...I thought it was mine."

He stopped dead, arms limp at his sides. "Who is it?"

I held the phone toward him. "Your mother."

A muscle in his jaw ticked. He shifted on his feet. "I have nothing to say to her."

I stood and stepped closer, covering the mouthpiece with my thumb. Alena didn't need to hear this. "I don't know what happened, but she wants to talk and fix things." I touched his forearm. "She's reaching out. She's worried about your father's health."

He didn't flinch. His body nearly turned to stone. "Not interested. You can hang up."

*Excuse me?* I reviewed my words, wondering if they hadn't come out as planned. But my brain was functioning. He'd heard me just fine. "This is your family, Jimmy. How could you not want to speak with her and make sure your father's okay?"

Instead of replying, he wrenched the phone from my hand, hit End, and tossed it on the ground.

My pulse thundered, blood rushing in my ears. "What is wrong with you?"

"There's nothing wrong with me, Rachel. It's them who have the problem."

Rachel. He called me Rachel. Not Sunshine or Ray. It was detached, cold. This was the Jimmy who'd spent an hour flirting with me only to tear off and leave me in his dust. Here I was, about to pour my heart out to him, tell him I was ready for us to move forward, and he was calling me *Rachel*.

I poked at his chest. "You're the one with the problem. Your father might be sick, and your mother called to bridge the gap between you. I don't know the details of what tore your family apart, but this is your chance to make it right. If you ignore them, you'll regret it."

He shook his head. "This isn't like what happened with you and your dad." His fist swallowed my finger, ceasing my stabbing. "My family is nothing but poison."

His blue eyes had never been so frosty, the silver at the edges sharpening into icicles. With a flare of his nostrils, he dropped my hand and turned away, jamming the rest of our stuff into his backpack. My throat burned. Gone was the man who'd told me I made him better. Disappeared was the lover

who'd loosened my inhibitions. This cold-hearted imposter turned a blind eye to his pleading mother, and I couldn't process the change.

When he got the bike loaded up, he planted his hands on the leather seat and slumped forward. "I'm sorry," he said, defeat in his voice.

His apology eased the sting behind my eyes, but we so weren't done here. "You hung up on your mother, Jimmy. You're not some angsty sixteen-year-old. She needs your apology, not me."

He spun around. "You don't understand. My father said things to me a son should never hear, and she let it all happen. They ruined my life and made some brutal choices. Let's just..." He scrubbed a hand down his face, shook it off, then approached me. My arms were crossed, my spine straight. He dipped his head to my level. "Can we sit and talk about this? I'll tell you what happened. The whole sordid mess."

Tenderness laced his tone, and I softened, but this was bigger than Jimmy and me and our fledgling relationship. "Will you call your mother back? After we talk?"

He flattened his lips and jammed his hands into his front pockets. "No. I'm done with them. As far as I'm concerned, I don't have family."

My abdomen cramped, stealing my breath. He had a mother reaching out and a sick father, but he *didn't have family*? So many things about Jimmy didn't fit into my world, most of them superficial. Still, I'd decided to overcome my reservations, because he was worth it. This wasn't superficial, though. This was the meatier stuff, the thing that made a man tick, and our clocks were set to different time zones.

How could I love someone who'd rather nurse his anger than make amends?

My head warred with my heart, a dizzying battle that had me shaking. I dug my toes into my sandals. "I'd like to go back, if that's okay. We can talk tomorrow." I needed space. Time to process and make sure my feelings were more than

infatuation. That he was the man I believed him to be. I probably needed a glass of wine, too.

Silence built between us, an extended pause that worsened my turmoil. He huffed out a sad laugh. “You know what? There’s no need to talk to this out. This is all an excuse for you to continue keeping me at a distance. We’re just casual, like you wanted. I wouldn’t want to mess up your tidy life, anyway.”

His reproach hit hard, knocking the wind from my chest. He had no clue what I’d nearly confessed. That I was going to jump in with both feet, stop fighting our connection. Finally open up. Or...was I? I’d given him such a hard time recently. Playfully maybe, but he’d put himself on the line, and my rebukes must have hurt. Still, if he was the guy for me, how could everything be undone by a phone call?

Tears stung my eyes, a headache setting in, along with a lump in my throat. If I hadn’t answered that phone, we’d be tucked together on his bike, planning our week. Our sleepovers.

Now we couldn’t look at each other.

He plunged his hand through his hair, then strode to his bike. Like he was finished with me. I bit my cheek, barely containing my tears. My mind kept flitting between his anger, his mother’s plea, his sick father—*my* father, forever taken from me—to our perfect day, and the way my body had responded to his, landing on my selfish choices the past weeks.

Unsure how to unravel it all, I did the only thing I could—*nothing*. I climbed onto his bike, held on, and spent the ride trying not to cry.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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### JIMMY

Rachel was the girl for me. I knew it in my bones, felt it in the ache constricting my chest. But I was tired of her games. The ride back to San Francisco was torture. Her thighs hugged mine, her hands gripping my sides, but she wasn't present. Her reaction wasn't surprising. She didn't know about my plan and the ruin it would bring to my family winery, but denying my mother was a big fat X in her books. A checkmark in her undateable column—next to tattoos and bartender.

She may have been the girl for me, but I was done trying to be the guy for her.

When I pulled up to her apartment, she didn't move. Her chest wasn't pressed to my back, but I could feel each of her inhales and it hurt. It was too much, she was too much, and I *felt* too damn much. Two hours ago, we'd had the best sex of my life, raw and open and *real*.

Now we sat like strangers.

She pushed off my bike and paused on the sidewalk. "Thanks for the picnic, and the wine. I..." She trailed off, turmoil in her fidgety stance. "I'm sorry for how it ended."

I was sorry, too. Sorry I'd lost my temper and that my mother had shoved her way back into my life. Sorry I wasn't enough for Rachel, but it was time to let her go. It had taken

me years to be comfortable in my own skin. I needed a woman who respected that.

Gripping my handlebars, I wrung my hands around them, tamping the urge to strut over, carry Rachel up to her apartment, and remind her how *good* we were together. But her indecision was palpable and getting in deeper wouldn't end well for me.

At the least, she needed to know the truth of it. "I'm not perfect, and my family situation is a disaster, but I'm not the bad guy here. If I thought you'd have listened, I would have explained things, but you've had me running in circles. I can't keep on like this. It sucks you can't see what we have. It sucks how hard I've fallen for you. But I..." I revved my engine, unable to go on. "It's better if we end things."

I peeled out the second I said it and didn't glance back. *Couldn't* glance back. If relief had flooded her features, it would have cut deep. If she'd looked crushed, I would have said fuck it and grabbed her and kissed her and apologized for being such a dick, only to wind up back here the next time she freaked out.

Lose-lose.

I drove for an hour, gut twisting, cruising the streets in search of peace that didn't come. Just as my life was turning around, my family had to mess it up, *again*. Get in the middle of another relationship. Rachel could cope with me having estranged parents, but one hint they wanted to mend fences, and she saw me as the asshole in the equation. The troublemaker.

My path was clearer for it. I had to cut them off, once and for all. Bring their lies to light, clear my conscience. My mother would stop trying to reach me, and they'd all leave me the hell alone. Maybe then I'd meet a woman who could accept me as I was.

I pulled over by the ocean. Salt stung my nose, the expanse of the Pacific a welcome sight. Cars rushed behind me, waves rolled ahead, birds coasting above. I blinked through the

darkening light, envious of the seagulls and the simplicity of their existence.

Fly. Fish. Eat. Repeat.

My phone rang and I gritted my teeth, unsure if I should check it. If it was my mother, I'd probably toss it in the sea. If it was Rachel, I'd probably toss it, too. Then I'd jump in after it.

Unable to resist, I pulled it from my pocket. *Owen Phillips*. An unexpected name, but one that had me relaxing. We hadn't connected since his first text. He'd asked to hang out once, but Rachel was coming over, and I'd been greedy for her, unsure how many nights we'd have.

Not enough, in the end.

I hit Talk. "Owen Phillips."

"Last I checked," he said. "Wondering if you wanted to grab that beer."

I could drive around for the night, or stare listlessly at the horizon until the sun came up, but clouds were rolling in, dark with rain, and none of it would make me feel a damn bit better. It certainly wouldn't help me forget I'd have to see Rachel in four days and pretend I was over her.

"Sounds great," I said.

Thirty minutes later, I walked into The Blue Door. My gaze cut to the stools Rachel and I had sat on as I coaxed her into a no-strings affair, clueless to what I'd started. It was probably stupid to revisit this place, but it had a cool vibe, and the familiarity was comforting. Cameron stood behind the bar, and I spotted Owen at one of the cramped tables, spinning his tumbler of amber liquid. He glanced up as I came in. His eyes skimmed over me, past me, then darted back. A grin split his face.

I ordered a beer from Cameron, then made my way over to Owen. He clasped my hand and pulled me into a hug.

"Been a long time," I said.

He thumped my back. "I'll say. Barely recognized you."

I wasn't the only one who'd changed. Owen was still taller and broader than me, but the eighteen-year-old I'd chased around the soccer field had worn jeans and running shoes back then, his shirts often from Goodwill—he'd showed up at school once, an old top of mine on his back. That kid had hidden behind a mess of sandy hair. He'd been the first to throw a punch if it meant protecting a friend.

This thirty-year-old man seemed cool and collected: trim hair, gold watch, pressed dress shirt and slacks. Like me two years ago.

"You join a biker gang?" he asked as we sat.

"I heard membership came with health insurance." We shared a grin, and I gestured to his business attire. "What about you? Did a millionaire mug you and swap out your second-hand clothes?"

His straight posture relaxed. "I had a meeting, hence the clothes. And if my friends in D.C. saw my teenage self, I'd have gotten laughed out of the city."

A bead of moisture dripped down my bottle. I spread it around with my thumb. "Heard you were living there. Married. Working some fancy finance gig. Why'd you guys move back?"

He swirled his drink as low murmurs rose from the half-filled room. Blues tunes strummed from the speakers. Owen tapped his finger against his glass. "I moved back on my own. Left everything behind. The wife. Job. All of it. Consider me starting fresh."

"Jesus. Anything you want to talk about?"

"Yeah, actually. Would probably do me some good, but it's a messy divorce, and the judge assigned to the case has a thing about us airing our dirty laundry. My lawyer advised me to keep my mouth shut. My soon-to-be ex-wife is an attorney herself, and she can be"—he took a healthy pull of his drink, then crunched on an ice cube—"aggressive."

"Well, I'm around if you want to unload. My life took a header off a cliff a couple years back. You'd be preaching to

the choir.”

“That header have something to do with why you don’t talk to your folks?”

I gripped my beer so tightly my rings bit into my skin. Last thing I needed was more family talk. “Not something, everything. And how’d you know we were on the outs?”

“I called them to get your number. Your mother jumped all over me, demanding I talk some sense into you, convince you to call them.” He shook his head. “That woman always scared the crap out of me.”

I huffed out a laugh. “She has a way with words. Remember when she picked us up from that soccer tournament in San Diego and caught us sharing a beer under the bleachers with the Ellis twins?”

He coughed around his next swallow, pounding his chest and clearing his throat. “What did she say again? ‘If you’re not in the car in two minutes, you’ll never need a protective cup again.’ My nuts crawled into my stomach.”

“The Ellis twins were worth it.”

The memory settled, the first positive one I’d had of my mother in ages. Others surfaced too: her singing me to sleep when I was sick, her tears of pride when I’d earned my Master Sommelier. The moments tugged at the frayed edges of my heart, guilt surfacing the way it did at times. A pang that didn’t last.

Her interference with Rachel had singed all residual fondness. As did the memory of our last argument. When it mattered, when my future hung in the balance, she’d turned a blind eye.

Owen nudged my foot under the table. “There something *you* need to get off your chest? I may be under a gag order, but I can listen.”

We hadn’t seen each other in twelve years. No phone calls. No Facebook chats. I didn’t know the first thing about his work or the woman he was set to divorce. In school, we’d picked up girls together and drank beers underage, sweating it

out on the field with our teammates. We'd since grown into men, but underneath we were still the same boys, finding our way through life one fuck-up at a time. "There was this girl," I said.

"Isn't there always?"

"Pretty much." I ran my tongue over my teeth. Rachel's taste still lingered. As did the feel of her lips, her skin. *Always* a girl. But this mess had started before her. "Her name was Sophia, and I met her after college. Her family bought the property next to ours. That winery on the hill?"

He nodded, and I went on, ready to purge the story. Get it out. Eviscerate the guts of it. "Her father and mine didn't get along, something about pesticide usage seeping onto our grapes. My folks were pissed when I asked Sophia out. Not that my father giving me a hard time was new, but it wasn't cool. Then Sophia's dad found out our property division line wasn't accurate. He sued my father for a section of his vines, and the bastard won."

Owen let out a low whistle. "That must have burned."

"More like set off an explosion. By then I'd been with Sophia two years and planned to propose. But I was given an ultimatum. End things with her or lose the winery. Lose everything I'd worked toward. So I chose the girl, assuming he was full of shit. The man had always been stubborn, but I was his son, right?"

"Wrong?"

I clenched my fists. "The fight we had could've been heard for miles. The whole business landed in my brother's lap and I was disowned. But the best, the fucking kicker, was when Sophia found out, she turned down my proposal. I lost Offshoot Winery for her, and she dropped me like a rock."

Two years later, I could still barely choke out the words.

Owen winced. "Man, that's harsh. Your dad was always stubborn, though. Maybe it's his age. Some old-fashioned views on family."

My father was twenty years older than my mother. So focused on the winery, he'd married late, and my brother had often joked she'd end up as his nurse. A joke that had lost its humor.

I mulled over Rachel's words today, that he might be unwell. It was likely a ruse. A trick to get me on the phone. If it were serious, Alena Giannopoulos would have shown up at my place and dragged me out by the ear. Still, I couldn't tell if the possibility made me sad or worried or protective. It was hard to feel much under the ache of losing Rachel.

I lifted my beer in salute. "To the women who ruin us."

"I'll toast to that."

I didn't mention how rough I'd been, or how I'd met another woman, one who was *real* and *beautiful* and had opened my eyes to the world. That not driving to her place and convincing her to give us a proper chance was killing me. Righting the wrong my family was intent on denying would be the only bright spot in my near future.

We finished our drinks, another round ordered as we caught up, painting the broad strokes of our lives. Turned out Owen was tired of working insane hours and planned to get into carpentry, a skill he'd developed since school. He wanted to make furniture and volunteer on some Habitat for Humanity projects.

Talk of giving back to the community played over in my mind, bringing with it thoughts of running viticulture events. Rachel had prompted the idea, her presence in my life shifting my thinking. Even before her, I'd grown tired of slinging drinks at Rudy's Tavern, and the contest had reawakened my love of wine. I could have denied it all I liked, but it was in my blood. Just like it was in Rachel's. My ray of sunshine.

On cue, my ribs tightened.

Ready to get home and end this shitty day, we said our goodbyes and made plans to meet again. Unloading felt good, having a friend to grab a beer with even better. But neither lifted the weight from my chest.

By the time I got outside, the rains had unleashed, curtains of water draping the city in mist. I didn't flinch or run to my bike. I let the downpour wash over me. Puddles grew; cars splashed sheets of water onto the sidewalk. My heart was as heavy as my sodden clothes.

At home, I parked my bike and grabbed my backpack and helmets, everything a reminder of what I'd lost. Two steps toward my apartment, I stopped. My heart migrated to my throat. I blinked, sure the rain had blurred my vision, but a figure was hunched on my stairs.

A figure that looked a hell of a lot like Rachel.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

---



RACHEL

I couldn't be sure how long I sat there. A light drizzle fell, my harried pulse slowing as the cool liquid drummed on my head, my arms, my legs. My jean jacket soaked through quickly, my sundress and leggings sodden. I didn't care. Jimmy had ended things. He'd called me on my erratic behavior, had admitted how hard he'd fallen for me, then he'd driven away.

With my heart.

It was all clear, suddenly, how I'd let us derail. Jimmy had apologized for his abrupt behavior, had asked for a chance to explain, but I'd clung to his indiscretion, allowing it to taint my mind. All to make pushing him away easier. I'd sabotaged our relationship from the start, holding back, taking instead of giving, so many stupid fears feeding my actions. But I was unprepared for him to end things, each word cutting deeper than expected. Watching him drive away had been worse, my chest caving the farther he got.

And I needed to get him back.

The rain pounded the pavement, tires spraying water as cars rushed by. I wrapped my arms around my legs, lay my chin on my knees. I wouldn't move from this spot until Jimmy returned and I apologized for my cowardice. I'd live here, if need be.

An eternity later, a familiar voice, deep and rich, said, “Rachel?”

My head snapped up. Jimmy’s hair was as soaked as mine, his clothing, too. We stayed immobile, as though the sky hadn’t opened up, dousing us with its fury. I dragged a hand across my face, unsure if tears were mixing with the rain.

This time I didn’t hesitate.

“I’m so sorry. I want you. I want to listen to you, understand you and your life, and I want us. I was scared and stupid, too many family issues holding me back.” My words fell as fast and hard as the downpour. “Yes, hearing you dismiss your mother like that and getting angry at me was hard, but I don’t know what you’ve been through. It was wrong of me to judge. And you may be frustrated with me, tired of my games, but I’m done playing. I think about you all the time, wondering what you’re doing. Hoping you’re thinking about me. You made today perfect, and I ruined it. And I’m just—”

“Ray.”

My heart hitched. He’d called me *Ray*. Not Rachel. It could have meant nothing. It could have meant everything. I bit my lip to keep it from trembling.

Then he said, “Get over here.”

My belly dipped and I jumped, opposing forces that had me shooting into his arms. We clawed at each other, everything soaking wet. Our mouths, wet. Our clothes, wet.

Salty tears dripped over our lips. “I’m sorry,” I said against his mouth.

“Shut up, Sunshine.”

We broke apart, long enough for him to grab his pack and helmets, then we ran upstairs. He slammed his apartment door behind us as we toed off our shoes. We left puddles in his living room, his bedroom, until we were in his bathroom, the showerhead spraying against the glass walls. We walked in clothed, and his hips pinned mine to the tiled wall. His cock was hard as granite in his jeans.

“You’re shaking,” he said, forehead pressed to mine.

Warm water sprayed over his head. I was still cold, my clothes locking in the chill, but the quiver in my limbs was all Jimmy. And we had too many layers between us. “I need you,” I said.

His nostrils flared. Eyes locked, we struggled with his T-shirt, the fabric suctioned to his body. We tossed it over the shower door, and it landed with a wet *squiltch*. My jacket and dress went next, leaving me in leggings and my bra, and him in jeans. His nipple piercings and silver chain rose with his shallow breaths.

We paused, not touching, ribbons of water dripping along Jimmy’s cut shoulders, over his tattoos, down his defined chest. So beautiful. So *not* what I’d pictured as the object of my desire. An image I was happy to overhaul.

My tears leaked again, the burn building as I acknowledged the mistakes I’d made. I placed my hand over his heart. “I won’t let you down again, but...I’m scared. I feel so much with you.”

His eyes searched mine—blue and gray, hard and soft. His dark hair was slicked back, those full lips inching closer. He kissed my cheeks, smoothed my tears with his wet thumbs. “This is how it’s supposed to feel. Kind of terrifying. And we still have stuff to talk through...but I want you, Ray. I’m all in.”

I reached around him and dragged my fingers down the grooves of his slippery back, knotted muscles shifting below my fingers. “Are you sure? I can be kind of anal. I mean, I like things tidy, and if we’re serious, you’ll have to meet my family.”

He pressed a finger to my lips. “I love anal, so that’s not an issue.” He winked. *Such a bad boy*. “Tidy makes messing things up more fun. As for us—I would love to meet the woman who raised you. I may look like a thug, but I can be charming.”

He sure could.

“Now get out of those leggings so I can fuck you in this shower.”

He could also be dirty.

We peeled off our layers, adding them to the river rising on his bathroom floor. His large hands gripped my ass and lifted as I wrapped my legs around his hips, all that male power pressed between my thighs. Power I had to touch.

One hand on his shoulder, I fisted his shaft with my other, reveling in the feel of him, so hard and thick, because he wanted me. I slid my hand up, root to tip, my thumb toying with the barbell under his swollen head, then I ground into him, pressing his length and piercing against me. Gone were my inhibitions, my reservations dripping down the drain with my tears. This man was all mine.

I swallowed my shyness. “Fuck me.” I dug my knees into his sides. “Hard.”

His pupils dilated, a low growl rumbling from his chest. He didn't hesitate. He pulled his hips back until the tip of his cock dragged down my belly and lined up with my entrance. His thrust was forceful, slamming me against the wall. The raining water was hot, the tiles at my back cold, my body so full with Jimmy. With *us*. He kissed my collarbone. His teeth scraped my skin, water coasting over my open mouth as I groaned.

“You're mine,” he said, wet sounds of slapping skin echoing in the small space. “Don't push me away again.”

“I won't.” I pulled his hair, drank from his lips. “I'm yours.”

I think he said *mine* again, but his gravelly voice disappeared in our hungry kiss, our tongues tangling as they slid against each other. I met his thrusts, my eyes rolling back. Electricity hummed along my skin. The drag of his cock, in and out, fanned the sparks. Hotter. Wilder.

I apologized with my mouth, sucking a path down his neck, over the hard bone of his shoulder, sinking my teeth in

when he pushed deeper. His fingers dug into my ass, possessive and hard enough to bruise. It spurred my lust.

“I’m so close,” I said.

“I’m right there. You make me fucking crazy.”

He changed our angle, freeing a hand to squeeze my breast and take my nipple into his mouth. My whole body clenched. Wet from the shower and his mouth and *him*, heat pulsed through me, sharp shocks that shook me to my core. His orgasm chased mine, both of us chanting *fuck* and *yes* as we stole our pleasure.

My limbs slackened. We traded lazy kisses as he pulled out of me and eased my legs to the floor. “I love your pierced cock,” I said against his mouth.

We swayed under the water, dancing to an unheard song. He rolled his tongue around mine in a long, sensual stroke. “I love your tits. The perfect handfuls.”

“I love the dimple in your chin.” I pressed my lips to the spot. “I only just noticed it, under all that sexy scruff.”

He lifted my left leg by the knee and coasted his fingers up my thigh. “I could spend a week worshipping your legs, and I fucking love your badass tattoo.” He released my leg and slapped my hip.

“Nipple,” I said, circling the flat of his with my thumb, trailing the piercing.

“Neck.” He tasted my skin.

We named each body part we loved, punctuating the claims with a lick or kiss or nip, the water unrelenting, my chill extinguished, everything deliciously warm. We didn’t say we loved each other. There was still too much vulnerability between us. Too much uncertainty. But we said enough.

Then his face was between my thighs. I came on his tongue, shuddering until I sank to my knees, too. More kissing. More groping. I pushed him to his feet and took him in my mouth, pulling a long, hard orgasm from him. I’d never enjoyed giving head as much as I did with Jimmy. The power.

The control. His thickness in my mouth and piercing on my tongue.

Later, we sat cross-legged on his bed, Jimmy in his black briefs, me in his Harley-Davidson shirt, a bowl of red grapes between us. I popped one into my mouth. The sweet juice mixed with the tannic skin. “When you were a kid,” I said, “what did you want to be when you grew up?”

He plucked a grape and spun it through his fingers. He grinned, boyish and sweet. “A professional wrestler. Like in the WWE, not the Olympic kind. I was addicted to the shows, had all the action figures. Even had a name picked out for my wrestling persona.”

I flicked his ankle. “Spill it.”

He leaned closer and lowered his voice. “The Grisly Greek.”

I tried to stifle my laugh, but picturing a young Jimmy puffing up his chest and reenacting wrestling scenes as the Grisly Greek was too much. “Wow, yeah. I think you missed your calling.”

“Your turn, smart ass. Aside from your endless list of jobs, what did seven-year-old Rachel want to be?”

The title *winemaker* pushed to the tip of my tongue, but we were talking about childhood dreams and fantasies. There was my ballerina phase, but it hadn’t lasted long. My other wish was a lot more embarrassing. “I don’t want to say.”

“You brought it up.”

“I’m changing the topic.”

His hair had started drying, wavy black strands standing on end, a glorious mess framing his handsome face. If he really were a wrestling star, I’d name him the Heartthrob.

“Not a chance,” he said.

The Stubborn Heartthrob.

I picked up a grape and peeled its skin—a habit that drove my brother nuts—one thin strip at a time. “Fine. But this stays

between us. Gwen and Ainsley would never let me live it down.”

He rolled his hand, coaxing me on, and I sighed, slipping the naked grape into my mouth. “Big Bird,” I said.

“You wanted to be a big bird? As in fly?”

“No, like Big Bird. From *Sesame Street*. I wanted to be Big Bird.”

He tipped his head back, laughing. “Oh, babe, that’s priceless. I’ll be in charge of Halloween costumes this year.”

“Not on your life.” My cheeks heated, and when his comment sunk in, they positively burned. Halloween was in five months. Jimmy was imagining us together...in five months.

Why had I fought this feeling so long?

Still chuckling, he wrinkled his nose at my grape peelings and grabbed another, chewing slowly. “What’s your greatest fear?”

The mood sobered, intensity in his gaze. We hadn’t spoken of our argument yet, but it was there, below the surface, under the lines etched between his dark eyebrows. If nothing else, I owed him my honesty.

“Disappointing my family. When my brother got in trouble for leaving his room messy, I’d run to mine and check that my clothes were put away. Mitch has always been smart and driven, but he pushed his boundaries—skipping classes and winding up in detention. The more he rebelled, the tighter I toed the line. Like I had something to prove, maybe. The one time I colored outside the lines was with a guy like you.”

“Like me?”

“Not *like you* like you, but the dangerous kind with blue hair and ink and a collection of punk albums. Dating him drove a wedge between my mother and me, and it ended in a huge fight with my dad, which was the last time I saw him. So all this stuff”—I gestured between us—“the way I’ve put you off and have been difficult was tied to this fear of mine.

Letting my parents down again. Especially my father.” I rubbed at a dry spot on my heel.

He placed two fingers under my chin and forced my eyes on his. “You’re a strong woman. Independent. You have friends who love you, and you care about your mother and brother, more than most people I know. He’d be proud.”

Tears threatened again, a familiar wave of regret and sadness and longing for my father. A day didn’t pass where I didn’t think of him or silently ask his advice. When I opened my heart to the pain, it became hard to breathe. Even now, five years later, his loss had the power to break me.

I grasped Jimmy’s hand from below my chin and kissed his palm. “What about you? What’s your greatest fear?”

He threaded our fingers together. “The opposite of yours. Ending up like my father. Cold. Bitter. Stubborn. Having kids and never showing them affection. I’m scared I’m just like him.” Turmoil thickened his voice.

He may have been a stubborn mule—exactly how Alena had labeled her husband—but Jimmy was as far from cold as a man could be. “When I’m with you, you make me feel sexy and precious. That’s a man unafraid to show affection.”

He untucked one of his feet and placed it by my hip, settling his inked elbow on his knee. He ran his fingers through my damp hair. “You do crazy things to me, Sunshine.”

I purred at his admission. “The feeling is mutual. And I know you’re angry at your family, but that’s because you care. Apathy would be worse.” I touched his toned calf, dragged my nails through his dark hairs. “What happened? I want to know, and I won’t get mad. I just want to understand.”

Drawing a deep breath, he stretched his neck and exhaled. Then he spoke softly, the story binding us closer. We could share our hopes and dreams all we wanted, but the ugly truth was the iron that branded lovers. He started with Sophia, a name I was starting to loathe.

Meeting her in the grocery store had itched at me, but that was *before*. Now Jimmy was mine. My jealousy was irrational,

but here I was, playing that name game in my head, rhyming Sophia with *Banana-fana fo-phia* like a schoolyard bully. Pulling her hair and kicking her shins would have felt better. Still, I listened. His hand was in my hair, mine on his leg as he bled it all out: Sophia's family, the land dispute, and the ultimatum dished out by his father. The worst was the argument.

"The bastard tried to hit me." Jimmy practically spat the words. "I was bigger than him, stronger, but he was so mad he raised his palm to backhand me across the face."

He pulled away, releasing my neck to scrub his own. His body bristled with anger. "When I caught his wrist, he was livid. Called me a mistake. A disappointment. Told me no son of his would marry an enemy. The whole thing was surreal, like we'd spun the clock back to the sixteenth century. But he meant every word, and my mother listened to the whole damn thing. Aside from yelling at him once to stop, she let it play out. Neither of them called afterward, not that I would have answered. I had Sophia and, as far as I was concerned, she was enough. Until she fucked me over, too."

He dropped his head, as though the weight of his confession pressed on his shoulders. When he looked up, his eyes were a river of pain. "They discarded me like trash. Who does that to their kid? And why does it still hurt?"

Heart breaking for him, I pushed the bowl of grapes aside and straddled his lap. "Because you still love them. They're your parents, your family, and you still care." I pulled his head to my chest and pushed my fingers through his hair. "You might not be ready to forgive them now, but maybe in time, you will. Maybe, if you have a family one day, you'll want your kids to meet their grandparents."

He fisted the back of my shirt and buried his face in my neck, but he didn't reply.

My lingering guilt bloomed. He was right, earlier, saying he wasn't the bad guy. My father had loved me. We may have had arguments, and I'd thrown a tantrum or fifty growing up, but I'd never questioned my place in my family. To be told

you weren't wanted could push anyone over the edge. Add losing your livelihood and love, and it was no wonder Jimmy shut them out.

If his mother called now, I'd probably give her a piece of my mind. Nice Rachel would let Reckless Rachel loose.

But there'd been regret in Alena's voice. She missed her son, and his father might have come around, too. It was still possible for her to ease Jimmy's pain. For that, I would help any way I could. Jimmy couldn't be pushed, but if the situation presented itself, I'd find a way to bridge the gap between them.

There was still one question left to ask. Something that had been gnawing at me. "Sophia..." I said hesitantly. "Did you ask her to marry you because you loved her, or were you trying to upset your father?"

Jimmy pulled back and stiffened. His hands ceased coasting along my spine. "Why would you ask that?"

"It's just, I don't—"

"Forget I asked," he said, cutting me off. His cheeks hollowed, shadows darkening his face. "Sophia is in the past. We're over. What happened is done."

Like after the grocery store incident, he was shutting down, unable to relive that time of his life. It was unhealthy, and if I had to guess, I'd say aggravating his father had had something to do with that relationship. I'd walked the "provoke your parents" path. Dating Gabe had intrigued me, but he was more of a symbol. A way to prove my independence. If my father hadn't died, if I hadn't spent the last five years living the life I believed he and my mother had wanted, I'd probably look a lot more like Jimmy—riding a motorcycle, piercings hidden under my clothes.

Bad Boy and I were more similar than I'd realized.

He would need to face what had happened eventually, maybe own some part of the disaster. A mountain we'd climb another day. Our night had been intense enough, and I still had apologizing to do. With my body.

I shifted my hips, a subtle rocking that had him gripping my sides and pulling me closer. He thickened between my legs, and air hissed through his teeth. We lost ourselves in each other. Our fight, my job stress, his family drama, and all he couldn't face—everything faded, the only tangible feelings being our connection. And desire. And a pinch of *ohmyfuckingGod*.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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RACHEL

I was a new woman. Well, not *new*, new. I still had my wash-and-wear wardrobe. My straight hair hadn't gained unexpected volume. There was still no career on the horizon. But my hips swayed when I walked, a perma-smile plastered on my face. I was sickeningly happy.

The treadmill pushed me into a slow jog, my arms pumping at my sides. Ainsley and Gwen were finishing their yoga class, and I was humming along to One Direction (because I was twenty-seven going on sixteen), my mind on the man responsible for my current state of bliss, Jimmy *Bad Boy* Giannopoulos.

It had been two weeks to the day since we'd fought and kissed in the rain and gotten dirty in his shower. Two weeks of (holy hot) sex and (heart melting) talks and (delicious) sleepovers. We flirted openly at the contest sessions now and held hands on the street. The more time we spent together, the more I craved, never questioning my feelings, never caring if I slipped from proper to wild. I hung out with him at Rudy's Tavern; he picked me up on his motorcycle from the gym. We'd effortlessly slotted into each other's lives.

"The boy situation, looks like things are good."

I started at the gruff voice and gripped the handrails. "George. I didn't notice you."

911 was on the treadmill beside mine, a common occurrence these days. We'd built a friendship of sorts. I'd berate him for not dieting, and he'd ask me about my "boy." Never pushing his opinion on me, only passing the time. I had a tendency to overshare. I'd told him about Jimmy's love of wine and how we could talk for hours or not talk, and how Jimmy surprised me with another picnic last week—that one on my apartment floor, blanket down, fresh pasta made by his strong hands. I didn't share how my bad boy had pushed up my skirt and used his talented tongue until I was incoherent, but George had become an unlikely confidant.

"What makes you think things are good?" I asked.

He started the machine himself, even using the incline. He increased his speed. "The look in your eyes. That is the look of love."

I couldn't fight my giddy smile. "Maybe," I said, unwilling to analyze the extent of my happiness. I hadn't even told the girls how hard I'd fallen for Jimmy. My feelings were intense, but something kept me from sharing those three words with him. Fear, maybe, that the second I let it all flood out, it would drown me.

George marched, his focus on the windows in front of us. Pedestrians strolled by. "Nonsense. I may be old, but I know love. Thirty-two years ago today, I married the most beautiful woman in the world."

Reverence coated his voice, love for his wife evident in his husky tone. "It's your anniversary, then?"

He nodded, and I slowed my treadmill, matching his speed. Each year on my parents' anniversary, my father used to book a hotel room. He would buy my mother flowers and treat her to a fancy dinner. She would walk on air for a month afterward. He died a week before their twenty-fifth year. When the hotel emailed to confirm the booking, my mother's keening could be heard across the city.

I blinked rapidly and steadied my breaths. "What have you planned for the occasion? Flowers? Chocolate? Wine?"

He waved a dismissive hand. “I am not an amateur.”

For a grumpy old man, his sweetness was endearing. “What does a *professional* husband buy his wife to celebrate their love?”

“A weekend away from me.”

I choked on a laugh. “You booked your wife a private getaway for your anniversary?”

Smug, he increased his incline. “Of course.”

He obviously knew the woman. If a pampered weekend alone would make her happy, more power to them. “I’m sure she’ll love the gesture,” I said.

He harrumphed, clearing his throat as though it were lodged with rocks. “I cannot gift her the one thing she wants. It is the next best choice.”

“What does she want?”

He paused briefly. “To reverse time.”

His wife must be one of those obsessive women, fighting age, filling her face with creams and Botox. I caught my reflection in the window, a transparent view of myself. I had my gran’s freckles and her slender build. My straight brown hair was all my father, along with my large eyes. The bend in my nose matched my mother’s, as did my fuller bottom lip. I was a living puzzle, my pieces shaped by my family. Altering even a bit of myself would be unthinkable.

Plus, Jimmy said he couldn’t wait to add laugh lines to my eyes.

As George and I walked in silence, I imagined Jimmy’s reflection next to mine—so different, so rugged. Yesterday, during our contest session, his hotness had distracted me. His hotness *always* distracted me, but this time I botched the tasting. The basement cellar had felt cavernous, only eight contestants left before the final round next week.

Mr. *Master Sommelier* was a shoo-in. Jimmy never broke a sweat, the tastings and serving tests like taking candy from a baby for him. I had my money on the Schnozinator for his

competition. Although the blond, April, seemed competent, too. She nailed every service exercise, making me feel like I'd sprouted extra thumbs.

The tastings had been my strength, until yesterday. Not just because of how Jimmy's T-shirt had clung to his biceps. My palate had been off. Glasses of Syrah were lined up before us, a grape I'd always admired. I should have discerned the acidity and earthiness of the old-world wines no problem, noted the fruit-driven qualities of those from Australia and the U.S. Instead the flavors melded, my answers more guesses than fact. It had been worse than my multiple choice psych exam back in college. I'd spent that painful hour circling letters based on the women present, guessing their bra sizes.

Any minute, I expected a termination email in my inbox.

But another impending disaster loomed larger: Jimmy's meet-and-greet with my mom in a few hours.

My belly churned, the prospect of her horrified face souring my mood further. George and I walked at an even pace, both lost in our thoughts. He grunted in exertion, and I eyed my new friend. He was straightforward and as old-fashioned as they came. Maybe his opinion could prepare me for the worst.

"Can I ask you something, George?" He gave a sharp nod, and I swallowed. "Remember that advice I was after, about approving of your son's girlfriend?"

His mustache twitched, but he didn't reply.

"You made your opinion pretty clear. One I don't agree with, by the way"—I shot him the evil eye—"but I'm taking my boyfriend to meet my mother tonight, and he's the exact opposite of who she imagined me with."

"Is there a question?"

I snickered at his snarkiness. "Yes, *there is a question*. What can I do to soften the blow for my mother? Anything that might help her get past the superficial stuff."

He continued his soldier march, his paunch practically hitting the machine's console. "Do you care for this boy?"

“I do,” I said quietly.

“Does he care for you?”

“Yes. I mean, I think he does. He says he does.” A flush crept up my neck, like I was in high school, whispering about a secret crush. “I’ve never felt like this about someone. I’m nervous I’ll mess it up. Worried my mother will scare him off. He’s really special, and he’s estranged from his family. They hurt him badly. So I guess I want my family to love him. Remind him what that’s like. He deserves it.”

My newfound fears lodged in my stomach. I’d gone from being afraid of rocking my familial boat to worried my mother would be so awful Jimmy would have second thoughts. Even if she hated him and couldn’t see past his tough exterior, I’d stand by my man. Shoulders back, head high, I’d prove how happy he made me. Still, the prospect of dealing with her dramatics was daunting. She would never cut me off like his parents—not permanently, at least—but her superpower was just as scary: Maternal Guilt.

Which meant Jimmy could face more parental rejection.

George slowed his treadmill until it stopped. I followed suit, waiting on his wisdom. The man could have nothing but wrinkles to show for his age, but I’d bet each line represented knowledge earned.

“Love is beautiful,” he said. “It is the heart of life. Show your mother your heart, and she will understand.” His eyes were a light blue, clouded with age, a red rim often at the edges. Today they glistened, as though he were choked up. Discussing my love life probably reminded him of his wife.

I also didn’t contradict him and claim I was still waffling in the *maybe* love column. It would have felt like a lie.

“This man,” he added, “he is lucky to have you, and my wife was right to send me here.” He stepped off his treadmill and patted my arm, a sweet gesture I hadn’t expected.

“Thank you,” I said.

He offered a thin smile and left. I had no idea how his wife sending him to exercise figured into anything, but his touch

eased my churning stomach, as did his words.

Until Ainsley bounded over and smacked my butt. “Two hours until D-day. You ready to puke yet?”

I rubbed my backside. “I was doing fine until a second ago. And is that sweat on your forehead? Did you actually work out?”

She rubbed her towel over her face. “Emmett was in the class, behind me, so I had to show him I’m into those stupid breathing exercises, and that I can *bend*.” She winked.

“Did you ask him out?”

She tossed her towel around her neck and held each end. “Sadly, I did not. He left before I had the chance.”

Gwen snuck up behind her and tugged her ponytail. “He rolled his mat in record time and bolted, to avoid her.”

“Says you,” Ainsley huffed.

“Honestly, you need glasses. Emmett is gay with a capital G, and Ainsley here”—she poked our friend in the side—“is in denial.”

Ainsley scrunched her button nose. “I still think you’re wrong.”

“I am *not* wrong. Have you seen him eye other dudes? Totally scopes them.”

“Whatever. Gay or not, drooling over him helps pass the time.”

Gwen ran a hand up the back of her neck. “I’ll give you that. Gay, straight, or bi, the man is fine. Speaking of fine men, have you prepped Jimmy for the interrogation he’s about to face?”

The girls knew how to ratchet up my stress levels. “As much as I can.”

“I’d love to be a fly on the wall when your mother sees him,” Ainsley said.

“A video would be awesome.” Gwen’s heartfelt contribution.

“You two suck at pep talks, and if I don’t get home soon, we’ll be late. I need to start this night on the right foot.”

As I pushed past them, Gwen said, “Tell him to wear a tie.”

The image of Jimmy in a tie was ridiculous. And hot. Especially if he were shirtless. I fanned my face.

“Have him wear a cup,” Ainsley added. “Your mother is skilled with her kitchen knife. One look at his tats, and she could ‘accidentally’ circumcise him.”

My cackle exploded, a blast of sound that had all heads swiveling our way. “I’ll keep that in mind.” But my man *was* circumcised, and if I told them about his jewelry, they’d ask for photos and a life-sized sketch.



Jimmy threaded our fingers as we neared my mother’s front steps. “I’ve always loved these houses. The Painted Ladies, right?”

I nodded. “My father admired them for years. It was a big deal when he bought it.” The street was quiet, the pastels of the row houses blanching under the setting sun. My father had loved the nickname attributed to the Victorian homes. The day he’d bought our yellow and red slice of real estate, he’d popped a bottle of Veuve Clicquot and offered me my first sip of Champagne. It had tasted like sunshine.

We paused on the top step and Jimmy spun me to face him. “You ready for this?”

With his unshaven face and motorcycle boots, Jimmy was still Jimmy. But his jeans weren’t ripped, and his black T-shirt didn’t have band logos or sayings splashed across the front. He wanted to make a good first impression. The effort swelled my heart.

I shook out my silk tank top, hoping to staunch the gathering sweat. “Ready as I’ll ever be. I mean, it’s not like it’ll change anything, right? You won’t get freaked out and realize my family is nuts and decide you’re not into me and erase my number from your phone and never—”

His lips landed on mine, a deep kiss following. He always kissed me like this. Like I was his oxygen. He nipped my bottom lip. “No matter what, nothing will change. I’m here for you.”

Still, my nerves lingered.

Stanley was the first to greet us. She slammed into my legs and wagged her tail, grinning.

Jimmy sat on his heels and rubbed her cropped sides. “What’s your name?” he cooed as he stroked her. His attractiveness jumped ten notches.

“Stanley,” I said, although she looked like an imposter. She normally had crimped brown fur, like an eighties rock star, all of it a few inches long. My mother must have taken her to the groomers. Aside from her head, the rest of her was clipped so short, her skin shone.

He scratched her ears. “You’re a cute boy, Stanley, even though your haircut is dog ugly.”

Stanley wagged her tail, unconcerned by Jimmy’s insult. “You just told my dog she was a boy and called her ugly. Great first impression.”

He looked up at me, eyebrows raised. “You named your girl dog Stanley?”

On cue, Stanley shoved her nose in Jimmy’s crotch. He grabbed her collar. “Hey, there, Stan. Maybe leave the boys alone.”

Stanley liked what she smelled and dug her nose in farther. Smart puppy. “Did you put bacon in your pants? Because Stanley loves bacon and if you shoved some down there, she’ll be glued to your nuts.”

With one hand, he held Stanley at a distance. His other crept under my gray skirt, between my thighs. “You want to check?”

Did I ever. My passion for Bad Boy had only grown. One look, one touch, and I was one hot flash from mauling him. Unfortunately my mother’s front hall was neither the time nor the place. Especially when she chose that precise moment to greet us.

“Rachel, I didn’t hear you...”

Jimmy yanked his hand from under my skirt and stood. Stanley rubbed against his leg. I nearly fainted. My mother pursed her lips.

“Am I interrupting?” Her eyes danced the length of Jimmy, taking in his tattooed arms. Her expression soured, as though she’d chugged expired milk. Not a good start.

“Ma, this is Jimmy—my boyfriend. Jimmy, this is my mother, Lydia Kates.”

He dragged his palm down the side of his jeans and stepped forward, extending his hand. “Mrs. Kates, it’s a pleasure.”

Her attention darted from his hand to his face to me, returning for another circuit. Color rose to her cheeks. “It’s lovely to meet you.” She offered him a limp handshake. “Rachel, do you mind helping me in the kitchen? Jimmy can join Mitchell and Cora in the living room.”

The woman didn’t waste time. I pointed Jimmy through the archway. He squeezed my hip as he passed—a gesture of solidarity. A bulletproof vest would have been preferable.

My mother strutted down the hallway, each slap of her ballet flats punctuating her distaste. I followed, steeling my nerves.

She’d renovated the kitchen last year, a project that had kept her occupied. Large windows filtered light onto the new seating area. She’d updated the appliances and had added gray subway tiles, the all-white cabinetry trimmed to match the crown moldings. My father would have loved it.

What he would *not* have loved was the tension hanging between us.

My mother gripped the center island with one hand. She pressed the back of her other to her forehead, as though she'd sprung a fever. "What was that?"

Before answering, I closed the sliding pocket door to the dining/living area. I crossed my arms and faced her. "What was what?"

"That." She gestured wildly. "That *man*. When you said you'd met someone and wanted to bring him home, I was thrilled. Pleased you were moving forward in one area of your life. Then you show up with...him? Does he even have a job? Is he one of those street performers?"

My limbs locked, my teeth clamped so roughly my jaw hurt. "His name is Jimmy, not *him*, and yes, he has a job. He's a bartender."

"*Bartender?*"

"Bartender."

She swayed, a minute from fainting. "Lord, where did I go wrong?"

I inhaled until my chest hurt, then released my breath to the count of five. "He's a bartender, not a drug dealer. He's Greek and grew up in Napa Valley, but no, he doesn't have a fancy car or dress like Mitch and his friends. Jimmy's smart and sweet, and he makes me happy. If you give him a chance, you'll see that."

"Greek," she mumbled, as though unfamiliar with the term. Like our family trip to Greece had never happened. Like we didn't eat at Andros regularly.

"Yeah, Greek. You love Greek food. You order souvlaki all the time." And her not-a-Greek salad.

But I wanted to grab the nearest fork and stick it in my eye. This conversation was nearing the ridiculous, talking about Jimmy as though he were defined by his culture's food. My father had been Jewish, my mother was Catholic, my

grandparents from Europe and the United States. We had family dinners on certain holidays, and I was told stories of my heritage, but neither background drove my choices. Apparently my urge to please those around me did. As did my need to prove myself successful. Unlike Jimmy, who owned who he was, regardless of what others thought.

Pride surged at the strong man he was.

My mother straightened, the soft drape of her cashmere sweater a contrast to her stiff posture. “Have you sampled his souvlaki? Is that what this is about?”

*Oh my God.* “Ma, keep your voice down.” My cackle almost escaped, nervous energy and frustration bubbling up.

Her loud-nasal tone didn’t abate. “It’s like Gabe all over again—you rebelling, wanting to have fun with the boy from the wrong side of the tracks.”

“You are impossible,” I whisper-yelled. “He’s from *Napa Valley*, and I wouldn’t even care if he’d grown up in a trailer park. And he’s nothing like Gabe. I fought my feelings for Jimmy at first, for the same stupid reasons you’re judging him now, and I won’t make that mistake again. He’s the real thing. And yes, I’ve sampled his souvlaki.” I rolled my shoulders back. “It’s the best I’ve ever tasted.”

“Honestly, Rachel.” My mother fanned her face, unsure what to make of my outburst.

We’d rarely fought since Dad died. We quipped at each other, pecking like hens, but there had been no drawn out arguments, and we’d certainly never dissected my sex life. She’d gone too far, though, her inappropriate comments proving what I’d come to know.

I was in love with Jimmy Giannopoulos.

There was no maybe about it. No hesitation in my pounding heart. I wanted to fling my body over his, protect him from her negativity. This was not a fight she would win.

Her brown eyes welled, a look I’d come to dread. She was about to unleash the Maternal Guilt. “It’s all my fault. The

piano lessons I forced on you. The job for Uncle Charlie. The men I set you up with. You're rebelling because of me."

She was impossible. "It's not you. It's not the fact that I was bottle-fed or that you told me the Tooth Fairy wasn't real. I'm with him. That's the end of it, and I hope you find it in your heart to support me."

A vein in her left temple throbbed, her heated face nearly matching her pink lipstick, but she didn't speak.

I shook off my irritation and searched for my Zen. "Remember the day Dad was out of town and you rear-ended his car in our driveway?" Frowning, she nodded, and I went on. "I waited in the living room with you, and I'll never forget how foolish you felt. How terrified you were to tell him. Do you remember what he said?"

Chin trembling, she sighed. "As long as I get to spend the rest of my days with you, you can smash my car to pieces."

It was the day I understood what it meant to be in love.

I pressed my tongue to the roof of my mouth, suppressing the urge to cry. "I always admired your marriage. Dad supported everything you did. You made each other better. That's how I feel about Jimmy. What else matters?"

She flattened her lips. Whether to tame her emotions, like me, or in defiance, I couldn't be sure. But I'd said my piece. I swiveled and pulled the sliding door open, praying Mitch and Cora had more tact. If they were asking Jimmy about his freaking *souvlaki*, I'd claim adoption.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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JIMMY

Rachel walked into the living room—cheeks flushed, head bent—like her butt shot had just gone viral. Mitch was sharing a priceless story about the time twelve-year-old Rachel had peed her pants on a family trip to Mexico. Their father’s weak Spanish had led to him asking a waiter for *polla*, thinking he’d ordered chicken. Turned out, he’d asked for a “woman.” The conversation that followed had Rachel laughing until she’d wet herself.

As much as I wanted to hear more embarrassing stories, her look of mortification deepened as the gist of our conversation sunk in. She gawked at her brother. “Seriously? The *polla* story? Can I still file for emancipation and sever ties with this family?”

Cora giggled, the airy sound matching her appearance. She had boy-cut blond hair and big blue eyes. Her pink dress hung loose over her sprite-like frame. She placed a dainty hand on Mitchell’s knee. “You should stop. It’s not fair to Rachel.”

“Was it fair when Rachel told you about the pot brownies and my bathing session in Huntington Park fountain?” He quirked an eyebrow. When no one answered, he said, “Consider us even.”

But the evil look in Rachel’s eye as she sat next to me and glared at her brother said otherwise. She settled into my side, hand on my thigh. I shifted, stretching my arm behind her on

the couch. Stanley took advantage of the move and tried to shove her nose between my legs, *again*. The damn dog was relentless. I held her off with a calculated knee shift.

“She must have a thing for souvlaki,” Rachel murmured. Her maniacal laugh erupted, and she slapped her hand over her mouth.

Lydia entered then, a tray of dip in hand. Her face was an emotionless mask. “Contain yourself, Rachel.”

Her reproach sent her daughter cackling harder, a sound that had me wanting to pin Rachel down until I kissed her raw. Lydia, however, was unimpressed—with her daughter and her daughter’s choice of boyfriend. A situation I’d have to resolve. Winning Lydia over was important to Rachel, so it was important to me.

Rachel leaned into my ear. “My mother might take a while to warm up, and I don’t recommend the dip.”

I eyed the thick, white mixture warily and heeded her advice. Where her mother was concerned, I wasn’t about to back down easily. “You have a lovely home, Mrs. Kates.”

She sat opposite us, straight backed, her answering smile nowhere near pleased. “Thank you. Rachel tells me you’re a”—she cleared her throat—“bartender.”

A chuckle came from Mitchell, and my shoulders bunched. When I first met him, he’d seemed more genuine than his pressed shirt and gold cufflinks. He’d shaken my hand warmly and hadn’t flinched at my ink. It didn’t mean Rachel’s brother wasn’t judging me. I glanced his way now, braced for his disdain, but he was shaking his head at his mother, not me, like Lydia was a petulant child.

“Come on, Ma.” Amusement laced his voice. “The Healing Hearts luncheon isn’t far, and you mentioned something about a bartending issue. You should hire Jimmy.”

Lydia’s eyes widened in fear, and I nearly laughed. Instead of watching her squirm, I jumped in to save her. “Not sure I’m the right man for the job, but I know the event. It’s an

impressive fundraiser, and a great cause. Must take a ton of work.”

That won me a head tilt and closer inspection. “It does,” Lydia said. “I’ve helped organize the event since David passed. Or, more to the point, Rachel forced me into it.” She winked at her daughter, nothing but love in her eyes. “She was worried I’d lock myself indoors, which might have happened if it weren’t for my kids. They were here daily for those first couple of years.”

They all shared a sad smile, and I cupped Rachel’s shoulder.

During some of our quiet moments, she would whisper stories, her voice melancholy as memories spilled out: her and her father snorkeling in Mexico, their father/daughter school dance, how his hearty laugh had filled a room. She’d been Daddy’s little girl, and he’d likely been wrapped around her finger. His passing must have crushed her, but she’d held it together for her mother, had made sure Lydia pulled through. When things got tough, they’d banded together. As a family should. My father’s property had been threatened, not his life, and all he’d done was lash out.

Rachel’s phone buzzed, breaking the moment. Lydia turned her focus to Cora, asking about her teaching job. Rachel fished her cell from her purse and checked a text. Her face fell.

“You okay?” I asked.

She stuffed her phone away. “Yeah. Fine.”

Except her left cheek hollowed. She was stressed. “Who was it?”

She slumped into me and lowered her voice. “Alonzo. I was eliminated from the contest. But I’m fine,” she added before I could speak. “I was expecting it.”

Didn’t mean it hurt any less. Rachel didn’t like to fail. No one liked to fail. Every soccer match lost as a kid had me cursing and pouting, until my grandfather had sat me down

and told me real men used their frustration to improve. *Turn that anger into success*, he'd say.

I angled toward her and dipped my head to catch her eye. "You might not have passed that round, but you proved yourself in that contest. You have more passion for wine than anyone in there, me included. Please don't let it slip away."

The corner of her mouth curved up. "I have passion for *someone* in that group, and his jewelry, if that's what you mean."

One teasing word from her and my lust awakened, the jewelry in question ready for a tug. My dirty princess. "You're damn right you do, and the feeling is mutual. But don't brush this off. You're smart and your palate is amazing. We'll figure this out together."

She touched my cheek and said a quiet, "Thank you."

Guilt, familiar in its discomfort, coated my chest. And the way she looked at me? There was something deeper in her eyes, something I wanted to dive into. Bask in.

If I didn't need to end my family's lies, I'd bow out of the contest and give her my spot. Even if I won, I'd pass on the job. But it was more than putting things right. My parents had come between Rachel and me once, with nothing but a phone call. I wouldn't let it happen again.

The past week, Rachel and I had fucked and tasted every inch of each other, filling in the gaps with laughs and stories, sharing the details of our lives. The extent of my feelings, *my love* for her, floored me. And scared the hell out of me. I never thought I'd let myself feel this again, give someone the power to hurt me. But here I was, in love with this amazing woman. No way would I lose that. Not this time. Not her. She meant more to me than Sophia ever had.

I kissed Rachel's forehead, swallowing down my rising mix of emotions. I worried about where she'd go from here, hoping she wouldn't shy away from a career in viticulture like I'd ditched my Master Sommelier status. Something I needed

to rectify. If I wanted her to chase her dreams, I couldn't keep avoiding mine.

I'd thought more about organizing events for boutique wineries, using my education and whatever contacts I still had to build a festival. Events highlighting smaller producers. Soon, I'd make plans, but Rachel and the contest came first.

I glanced up to find Lydia watching us...with longing? Her brown eyes were glazed, her pinched mouth softer. Her pearls rose and fell on a deep breath.

She scrutinized her daughter. "Everything all right?"

Rachel squeezed closer to my side. "Just some bad news. But Jimmy's helping me figure it out. Nothing to worry about."

Lydia studied us, long enough I actually ventured toward the onion dip. Bad idea. It burned the roof of my mouth, the thick mixture nothing but mayonnaise and raw onion. Eyes watering, I forced it down, preferring Lydia's withering glance to that horror show.

She nodded once, as though coming to a decision. "I'm glad you've found someone supportive, Rachel. It's lovely to see."

Rachel pressed her hand over her heart. "Thanks, Ma. That means the world."

Warmth crept over me, uncomfortable in its intensity. Lydia's acceptance shouldn't have mattered. I'd stopped caring what others thought two years ago. Still, heat flooded my cheeks like I was a kid again, glowing from parental praise. It felt *nice*. Better than nice. It was a reminder my family had stolen more than my future. They'd cheated me out of basic affection, but Lydia sent it rushing back. Even at thirty, I soaked it in...and an idea caught, a way to run with her approval and pull the shards of my life together.

I leaned my elbows on my knees, nudging Stanley away from my crotch. "If you're in a bind for bartenders, I might be able to help."

Lydia's response came slowly. "The company we hired went out of business. We have a few others in mind, but the timeline is tight. Was there someone specific you'd recommend?"

"Not exactly. I've been wanting to promote smaller vineyards in the area. This type of event could be great exposure. You could market it as a 'diamond in the rough' thing. Let guests know they'll be sampling from the best boutique wineries. We'd have to spin it, maybe have them pouring from private collections at set stations, something to wow the crowd. Even do the wine tasting blind and have guests guess the grape, with prizes for the winners." I pushed my hand through my hair. "Sorry. Just thinking out loud."

Lydia didn't seem to mind. "Supportive *and* smart. I should have known better than to question my Rachel." She leaned back and clasped her hands. "I'd like to discuss this further, but I bet the girls would love the idea."

Pride rushed through me again, along with a sting of longing. If mending fences with *my* mother were as simple as proving I wasn't a selfish meathead, maybe I could suck up my anger and return her endless calls. Unfortunately, ours wasn't a trivial misunderstanding. *You were a mistake*, my father had claimed. A disappointment. She hadn't once stood up for me. No point wishing for the impossible.

But this, right now—my first taste of belonging in too long—was because of Rachel. Because she'd screamed pussy and had walked into The Blue Door and entertained my advances. Because she trusted herself with me. I'd have to do the same with her. Tell her about my plan and why I'd really joined the contest, but my excuses kept piling up. Delay tactics.

She would be pissed. No avoiding that. If hanging up on my mother had shoved a wedge between us, this stunt of mine had the power to ruin what we had. It all felt more fragile now. With my heart in the mix, it felt downright brittle. Like everything we had could shatter at any moment.

I'd still have to come clean, about the contest and the extent of my feelings. I should do it tonight. Get it over with

and hope for the best. Neck tense, I sipped my wine.

Mitch whistled a low note. “If Mom came around that quickly to your biker boyfriend, it might be a good time to tell her Cora’s pregnant.”

*That was unexpected.*

Rachel squealed, the sound so jarring, I nearly spat out my wine.

“Mitch!” Cora buried her face in her hands.

Lydia frowned at her son. “Stop being a pot stirrer, Mitchell. That’s nothing to joke about.”

Mitchell didn’t take it back, and Cora’s hands dropped to her belly.

“Oh my God. How could you not tell me?” Rachel didn’t wait for a reply. She was up in seconds, pulling Cora into a hug.

Lydia fanned her face. “A baby? But when? How? You’re not even married.”

Mitchell beamed at Cora as Rachel pressed her hands to Cora’s stomach. He shrugged at his mother. “Yes, a baby. When—she’s six weeks along. How—I could get into it, but Rachel might stick her fingers in her ears and sing songs like when she was a kid. As for the married part, we’re not in a rush. We weren’t expecting this surprise, but we’re thrilled. The rest will come later.”

Rachel jumped, chanting, “I’m going to be an aunt,” while Lydia tossed more questions at the couple, shocked Mitchell hadn’t proposed, wondering if they’d planned to move to a bigger place and where and when and listing all the ways she’d help.

Rachel may have been scared of her mother’s reaction to us, but I’d bet Cora and Mitchell had been shitting bricks, terrified to break their news. Unnecessarily. Lydia proved she was a woman whose sun rose and set by her kids. She’d already started coming around to me, and she’d no doubt spoil

her grandchild rotten, whether or not her son followed a traditional path.

I stood and shook Mitchell's hand, thrust into this nutty family. Everything with Rachel was a wild ride, but this was special. And tough. Some sadness would follow; her father wasn't here. He'd miss this important milestone, which meant tonight wasn't the best time to confess about the contest, or my love. Saying the latter wouldn't feel right with lies between us. It would all have to wait.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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RACHEL

“Are you sure this looks good?” Nothing about the leopard-print skirt hugging my legs would mix and match with my wardrobe. The black stilettos were dangerously high, the halter top flashier than I usually purchased, its greens and blues bright against my freckled skin. I still grinned, knowing I’d buy it all.

A hint of reckless just for me.

“If you don’t buy it, I will burn your wardrobe and send you through the streets in a potato sack.” Ainsley wasn’t one for subtlety, but she was indeed the Style Whisperer.

The instant we’d walked into the all-white space, sparse décor adding to the posh vibe, she’d sifted through racks and had chosen two outfits for me. The second was a homerun. The woman was like a hound dog, sniffing out perfect ensembles. She’d already found a purse to match her pink pumps and had Gwen buying a jade scarf to highlight her eyes.

Gwen came up behind me and hung a silver chain around my neck. “This would work, too.” The attached sphere dipped into my minimal cleavage.

I touched the pendant, then ran my hands over my hips, imagining Jimmy’s palms following the trail, strong and sure. He went crazy for my legs, an attribute this outfit played up.

“It will set me back,” I said, “but it’s worth it. And FYI, I’ll be on a serious budget soon.” I faced the girls, needing to share my news, get it out and make it real. “I’m going back to school.”

Ainsley surveyed the store. Gwen wrapped her new scarf around her neck.

Neither acknowledged my comment.

I cleared my throat and tried again. “I’m going back to school.”

“What’s on tap this time?” Gwen asked. “Window washer? Dog trainer?”

Ainsley adjusted my skirt, smoothing out a side seam. “I saw online that a girl critiques dick pics. Like, breaks them down and analyzes the positives and negatives. You should do that. With our help, of course.”

Gwen scrunched her nose. “I’m all for hot guy pics, but peen shots? Not sure.”

That was a *no* for me. There was only one male specimen I cared to look at. One I’d swirled my tongue around last night until Jimmy had grunted my name and spilled into my mouth. I licked my lips. “If Jimmy’s is the last I see, I’ll die a happy girl.”

“Is he big?” Gwen asked, nudging me. “He looks like he’d be big. And good.”

The girls hadn’t ceased prodding me, trolling for bits of information, trying to get me to share juicy gossip. I glanced around, worried the store owner could hear us. “I’m not talking about my boyfriend’s *dick*.”

“What else do friends talk about?” Ainsley piped in. “Since neither of us have men in our lives, we need to live vicariously through you.”

“Not happening.”

My friends, of course, started talking to each other, as though I’d vanished.

Ainsley tapped her chin. “I bet he’s small.”

“Or maybe he’s all about himself,” Gwen said, “and doesn’t know how to please her.”

“That would explain why she hasn’t dished about him.”

“Right? If he were good, she’d be all gushy.”

Tired of their taunting, my harsh whisper rushed out. “He’s the perfect size and rocks my world and knows exactly what to do, and he’s *pierced*, which is ridiculously hot, and that’s the last we’re talking about my sex life.”

Gwen held up a hand. “Back up, buttercup. Did you say *pierced*?”

Oh, crap.

Ainsley sighed. “Does he have a twin?”

Two women entered the store, browsing through the quiet space. Before my friends could grill me on details or my cheeks burned any hotter, I shoved the conversation back on track. “Like I said, I’m going back to school. Not to add another useless diploma to my collection. This time”—I inhaled deeply, memories of my phone call earlier today speeding my pulse—“I’m enrolling in the Napa Viticulture program. Not sure I can get in for the fall, but I talked to admissions and there’s a chance. I can probably finish the course in two years, then I’d apprentice, so I’ll be, like, thirty before I dive into the field, but I’m going for it.”

Gwen looked ready to launch an attack hug. “Are you for real?” When I nodded, she flung her arms around me and squeezed. “This is the best news! But I thought the school thing was a hard no. What changed?”

She released me, both of us grinning like loons. “A bunch of things, really. The contest reminded me how much I love wine, but the service stuff wasn’t for me. And Jimmy’s been talking a lot about his family vineyard, what it was like being involved. I think *not* going for it would haunt me. I’d always wonder.”

I didn't mention my birthday wish, still worried speaking it aloud would thwart my efforts. That my forward momentum was truly a result of that one fateful night. Everything with Jimmy was falling into place. Even my mother was on board with my plans.

After the Mitch and Cora bomb—the revelation bittersweet, knowing my father would never meet his grandchild—I figured returning to school wouldn't shock her. I explained how long it had taken to figure out my path. That my fear of failing again and delaying my life had held me back. She didn't cave right away, but she offered her support in the end. I *may* have pointed out my father was the reason I loved wine—a low blow, which made her cry—but she got behind my plan.

Sometimes a girl had to fight dirty.

“Does this mean you won't get to dress dead people?” Ainsley asked.

I shuddered. “My mother tried to force the funeral home issue, but she came around. Even offered to pay my tuition, which feels wrong at twenty-seven, but I'm done being stubborn. If she wants to help, I'll take it.” Which meant she'd hold it over me every time she asked a favor. More Maternal Guilt in her arsenal. Painful, but worth it.

Gwen pointed to the fitting rooms. “Go change. I'm buying your outfit as a *congratulations you're moving on with your life* gift.”

Ainsley clapped. “I'm buying the shoes and necklace. Jimmy will die when he sees you in that. And Rachel,” she called as I turned, “that pierced conversation isn't over.”

“Yeah,” Gwen chimed in, “I have questions. We can have a whole sex ed night. You'll use your dildo to show us exactly how his jewelry affects your pleasure.”

Damn them and their needling selves. But the thought of Jimmy seeing me in this mini-skirt put a bounce in my step. I hadn't told him about my school plans yet. As much as he'd pushed me to consider viticulture, the choice needed to be

mine. No outside influence. I had to make sure it was what I wanted this time.

The second I decided, though, I knew. I'd also bet my father was smiling down on me, pleased I'd taken the risk.

Suddenly I was desperate to share my news with Jimmy, and finally tell him I loved him. I'd been waiting, thinking we'd celebrate after tonight's final contest round. He and the Schnozinator would be serving top wine critics, both vying for the coveted sommelier position. Jimmy was sure to win, and I wanted the moment I shared those three words to be special, but I knew better than to delay important milestones. Losing my father had taught me that. The where or when or how of spilling my heart to Jimmy didn't matter.

Living without regrets mattered.

I had to drop by the gym to pick up my paycheck, then I'd run to his apartment and catch him before the contest. Tell him I was going back to school and that I loved him so much it turned me inside out. I'd give him the best good luck kiss in the history of good luck kisses. Maybe we'd have a quickie, too. My smile nearly split my face.



I reached the gym at four. Normally George and I would be on our treadmills by now, walking in time, him asking me about my "boy." I hated skipping our forty minutes together, time I'd grown fond of, but shopping with the girls and seeing Jimmy took priority. What I didn't expect was to hurry through the doors and practically walk into 911 himself.

I cringed, guilty for having ditched him. "Sorry I missed our workout. I hope you weren't waiting for me."

Instead of offering a signature gruff response, he touched the woman beside him. Her figure was slight next to his bulk. She turned and studied me, critical at first, a warm smile following. "Rachel?"

This woman was much younger than George. Thick black hair spilled over her shoulders, a turquoise pantsuit accentuating her trim frame. Something in her full lips tugged at me, the slope of her cheekbones and dimple in her chin subtle in their familiarity. She reminded me of a celebrity, maybe. Catherine Zeta Jones? Either way, she was gorgeous.

I smiled. “Yep, I’m Rachel. And you are?”

Her gold necklace rose as she inhaled. “I’m Alena—George’s wife and”—her arms shook slightly—“Jimmy’s mother.”

“Jimmy’s...*my* Jimmy’s mother?” My hand shot to my mouth, and I stepped back, my gaze flitting between this stunning woman and the old man I thought I knew. George. *911*. The grumpy father figure I’d confided in. The man who’d asked me questions about my boyfriend, never letting on who he was, stealing information about his son. A violent storm set sail in my stomach. “I don’t understand.”

“Jimmy is my son,” George confirmed, and my mind *reeled*.

Was there a hidden camera? Was I being punked? Maybe I’d slipped in those stilettos at the store, had hit my head, and was in a coma, the swelling in my brain causing hallucinations. I bit my cheek, tasting blood. Not a coma.

Somehow I found my voice. “You lied to me.” And he was so old to be Jimmy’s father.

“I did no such thing,” George said, his snarkiness ever present. “If you had asked, I’d have told you.”

“Excuse me?” The harshness of my tone had his watery eyes widening. “You said you only had one son.”

His face hardened. “Family matters are complicated.”

“Complicated?” My volume rose, but I didn’t abate. This was the man who’d torn Jimmy down and ruined his life. A man who’d abused my trust. “We’ve spent hours together and you never, not once, mentioned who you were. But you had no problem asking me about my ‘boy.’ So you could what? Spy on him? On us?” My voice dropped, disappointment and

sadness seeping through me. “I’d hoped Jimmy was wrong, that he could mend things with his family. Looks like I was being naïve.”

Jimmy would also potentially lose his shit. I’d been hanging out with his freaking *father*. For weeks. How would I explain that? Suddenly ill, I sat on the nearby couch. Guests often sat here and picked through fitness magazines, killing time. I wanted to curl into a ball and block out this reality.

“What I did,” George said, “I did for my family.”

Alena said something to him about giving us space. I didn’t watch him go, barely noticed her sit beside me. I was in khaki shorts, the black leather cool under my thighs. I fought the urge to press my forehead to the armrest, instead squeezing my eyes. *His freaking father*.

“I’ve been trying to reach Jimmy for a while, as you know.” Alena’s voice was soft but strong, the same as it had been on the phone. The day Jimmy and I had nearly broken up.

What was even happening?

“I found out where he lived,” she went on, “and I stopped by a few times, but never knocked on his door. It was one thing for him to ignore my calls. If he’d looked at me with hate...it would have crushed me. But I’d watch him, from time to time. Not often, but when missing him became too much, I’d follow him awhile, to gauge if he was happy. That’s when I saw you.”

Lines creased Alena’s forehead, sorrow in the depths of her eyes. Her despair was potent. “My husband is a good man,” she said, “but even good men do bad things. What happened with Jimmy was wrong. What George said was potentially unforgivable, and my silence was equally as harmful.”

When I didn’t comment, resignation laced her tone. “At the time, I thought my interference would make things worse. I decided to give them space to heal. Then everything happened with Sophia, and it spiraled out of control. I gave

Jimmy six months, hoping his anger would lessen. By the time I contacted him, he wouldn't speak with me."

I'd nearly chewed my cheek raw. "And you thought stalking him through me was the answer?"

She massaged her knuckles. "This family is on a thin wire. One more fight, and there would be no hope of patching things up. George can be difficult. He's fiercely stubborn and couldn't admit he'd been wrong. He also saw Sophia for what she was and believed losing Jimmy was worth saving our son from that woman. I'm glad Sophia is out of Jimmy's life, but things were said in the heat of anger that weren't true. I was wrong. George was wrong. We need the chance to make things right."

The night of the rainstorm, when Jimmy and I had shed our clothing and our walls, he'd admitted how hurt he still was. How deeply his family's actions had cut. That wasn't just a man needing to heal. That was a little boy who missed his mother and father and wanted to reverse time. And Sophia *had* had her hooks in my man—conniving woman that she was. It's possible George's interference had saved his son a lifetime of heartache, but underhanded deception would get them nowhere.

"It's not for me to judge what happened in your family. I wasn't there. I don't know the details. But this? Sneaking into our lives? It's not okay."

She nodded slowly. "You're right. It's not. But when I saw Jimmy with you, and the way my boy smiled? I realized you were making him happy. He wasn't going to let us in, and I was running out of options. It was wrong to send George here, but my husband had to work things out for himself. See you and understand his son was building a life, one we wouldn't be a part of. I'd also hoped he'd get a window into the damage he'd done. Without that, any meeting with the two of them would have turned ugly. I'd have lost Jimmy, once and for all. I'm not willing to let that happen."

It felt as though I'd swallowed a brick, my body unbearably heavy. Before this epic disaster, I'd grown to like

George. He was straightforward—or so I'd thought—and filled a void in my life, and George's fondness for his son wasn't contrived. Our last conversation, after I'd confessed Jimmy was scarred by his family's actions, George's emotions had run high. That was also the day I'd realized how much I loved my bad boy.

And I did. A sweeping love. The kind where you'd overlook being wronged if it meant seeing your lover happy. Although I wouldn't forgive his parents' deception easily, they weren't trying to hurt us. They were fighting to save their family, something Jimmy needed as badly as them. More, even. How could I deny him that?

I rubbed my chest, as though the movement would soothe my erratic heart. "It will take a while to get my head around this, but if I can help your family, I will. For Jimmy. But I can't guarantee he'll listen to me."

She exhaled and stopped fidgeting. "George was right when he said you were special. No matter what happens, I'm glad Jimmy found you."

Now I wanted to cry and...hug her? Which was strange. This whole mess was odd and unfathomable, my emotions pulling me in a thousand directions.

George joined us, but I wouldn't let him sit until he apologized for lying to me. He hemmed and hawed, but I shot him my best scowl, and he conceded. A first step forward. They then explained their plan, minimal though it was. They wanted Jimmy to join his brother and run the winery, give him everything they'd taken away. It would begin with a meeting, with George admitting the errors of his ways. I was to pave the road and convince Jimmy to hear him out.

Total piece of cake. *Right.*

That coma/head trauma scenario was sounding better and better.

After goodbyes and promises to be in touch, I made my way to Jimmy's place. This visit was supposed to be about telling him I loved him and sharing my school news. Now I

was contemplating dropping this parental atomic bomb, but heaping him with stress when he needed to be on his A-game for the contest didn't feel right. It would have to wait until after.

But I couldn't delay seeing him now. I had to remind myself of what we had and staunch my panic that this would turn into another picnic disaster, with him blowing up at me.

My heart wouldn't survive the fallout.

Full of trepidation, I hurried to his apartment. I started opening his door, when I noticed a tall man inside. Probably Owen. We'd yet to meet, but Jimmy had mentioned seeing him today, at a soccer game or something. He was happy to have his old friend in town and said it was because of me, that I'd made him realize all he'd been missing. Maybe I'd affected his life as much as he'd changed mine. Maybe he'd understand why I wanted him to give his parents another chance, despite their underhanded meddling. Or maybe he wouldn't.

My stomach lurched.

The two of them were in the kitchen and hadn't noticed me. Owen was in shorts and a tank top, a soccer ball under his foot. The back of his neck was sweaty. I placed my hand on the door to open it fully, when Owen said, "I still think fucking with your family winery is trouble. Once you do it, there's no going back."

I snatched my hand away, unease prickling up my spine. Instead of going in, I squished out of sight, like a creeper. Like some girl who eavesdropped on her boyfriend. This day was spiraling from bad to worse.

Jimmy's voice drifted out, his words adding to my dread. "If I don't do it, I'm just as bad as them. And every time one of them gets involved in my life, something goes to shit. Rachel accidentally answered a call from my mother, and I turned into an asshole. We also fought over other stuff, but I nearly lost her, and it's not okay. Once this is done, they'll leave us alone. It's not like they thought twice when they ripped the winery from me."

“You told Rachel yet?”

My ears burned. I was humiliated at how desperate I was to hear Jimmy’s answer, that I was still eavesdropping.

“No. But I will. Tonight. I’ve been scared she’d freak out, but she needs to know.”

My mind spun, attempting to piece together the meaning behind his words, but standing in the shadows felt as wrong as what George had done—lurking around, hoping for information.

I wiped my damp palms on my shorts, then shoved the door fully open. “What do I need to know?” I forced brightness into my voice.

Jimmy was downing a Gatorade and stopped mid-swallow. He and Owen shared a look, probably wondering what I’d overheard. *Too much and not enough.*

Even though I harbored a secret big enough to fill the Pentagon, and he clearly had one of his own, I couldn’t help but look. *And look.* Jimmy’s brow was slick with sweat. He’d tossed his shirt on the couch, and his workout shorts hung low on his hips. His chest and abs rippled with his deep breaths. If Owen weren’t here, if our lives hadn’t gotten irrevocably complicated, I’d lick a path over Jimmy’s pierced nipples and down his happy trail, not stopping until he was hard and in my mouth.

But Owen was here, and there was something Jimmy hadn’t shared with me. Something important enough that he was scared.

One foot on his soccer ball, Owen spun to offer his hand, but he pulled it back. “I’m Owen, but I doubt you want to touch my sweaty hand.”

Mine was damp, too, from nerves, not exertion. “We can save that for next time, but it’s great to finally meet you. How’s the move been?”

“Can’t complain. Things are more laid back than D.C., which is nice, and I’m volunteering on a Habitat for Humanity project.” He was handsome—tall and lean and fit, the type of

man I would have imagined for myself, before Jimmy. My gaze fell back to my bad boy, the only guy for me. His strong jaw pulsed, wariness in his wide stance. Unusual for him. Everything about this situation was off, setting alarm bells ringing in my head. My stomach didn't just lurch. It dropped to my feet.

Jimmy clapped Owen's shoulder. "Thanks for the game. Next time I'll kick your ass."

Taking the cue, Owen picked up his ball. "Not in this lifetime." He said a final farewell, leaving Jimmy and me alone, facing off.

I waited on his confession, while he was unaware I was hiding the tiny, unimportant, *miniscule* fact that I'd been hanging out with his father for weeks and had just had a conversation with his mother. *Kill me now*. Yesterday I'd been on cloud nine, everything in my life falling into place. Now I was just falling.

Still, I couldn't ignore the tightness on Jimmy's face, or the fact that he was scared I'd freak out. Words didn't get more ominous than that.

Practically holding my breath, I asked, "What haven't you told me?"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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JIMMY

*What haven't you told me?* It should have been a simple question, one I'd pored over for weeks. But this was Rachel, the woman who valued family above all else, and I was about to prove I was an asshole. I'd tried to rethink my plan, reassess if walking away was better than spilling the truth. Better than destroying the winery I loved. Then anger would cloud my mind. My father's nasty words would loop, his choice to cheat our customers unforgivable. This was the only way, and it was time Rachel knew.

"When I told you I joined the contest because I thought it would be fun, I lied."

"Okay..." She waited, arms folded around her waist, wariness in her stiff stance.

I jammed my hand through my hair and focused on the floor between us. "Offshoot Winery's head winemaker has been messing with our Cabernet Sauvignon, blending in more than the twenty-five percent of other varietals allowed."

I looked up, and her eyes widened. "Shit."

I forced an awkward laugh. "More like huge fucking disaster. I tried talking my brother and father into doing something about it, but they were happy to plod along. It had been happening awhile, without anyone clueing in. They figured if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

“But if people knew, they could be sued, couldn’t they? The wine world would be horrified.”

In Italy, a man had been charged for passing off cheap wine as a premium Brunello. In New York, Rudy Kurniawan had been sentenced to prison for falsely labeling wines and swindling people out of millions. My family’s transgressions weren’t so notorious, but the winery wouldn’t escape unscathed.

I confessed it all to Rachel, spilled the whole sordid story: seeing the contest flyer the night we’d met, needing to expose the lies by leaking them through the final round. My hope to finally let go of my past. As I went on, Rachel’s face transformed from flushed to ashen, one hand clutched over her chest. My heart nearly busted through my ribs.

I expected relief, my secret finally in the open. Instead my neck prickled, the air in the room suddenly suffocating. The sweat on my skin turned clammy.

“You’ll destroy them.” Her anguished whisper nearly cut me down.

I worked my jaw, everything feeling hazy. Wrong. Bad. “Breaking the rules isn’t cool, Ray. It’s gone on too long, and if it bites me in the ass later, my name will be ruined. If I do it now, I can claim I just found out. I’m aware of the fallout, that my family won’t forgive me. It also means they’ll finally leave me alone—*us* alone. I can move on. Don’t you want that?”

“Yes, I want that. But not like this.”

“It’s the only way.”

She made a frustrated grunt, arms tense, like she wanted to shake me. “In your stubborn head, maybe. But sabotaging your family winery, the winery that’s in your blood, will make it worse, not better.”

I fisted my hands, wishing I was at the gym, punching bag swinging, all my frustrations pummeled into leather. She didn’t understand. Even when she’d worried her mother wouldn’t support her choice of men, Lydia had proven her wrong. Rachel had only ever known love. “I’ve tried. For two

years, I've tried to put this crap behind me. But my parents aren't like yours. They are vindictive and selfish. I need to sever my ties with them."

Panic flitted across her face. "Your parents don't deserve this."

"You don't know them or what they deserve." There was that tone of mine again, biting and nasty. The asshole lurking below the surface. When I'd sipped my first glass of Offshoot wine in two years, I'd been rude to Rachel and had cut her off. I'd barked at her when she answered my mother's call. Now I was lashing out...and it gutted me. I could barely control the sting of my voice. I didn't understand why the hell my family still affected me so much. Ashamed, I dipped my head and rubbed my neck.

No. I wasn't over what my parents had done. Not by a long shot. And Rachel was getting dragged along for the bumpy ride.

I was about to apologize, when she said, "Actually, I do know them."

My head shot up. "My parents?"

Slowly, she nodded. Slowly, apprehension fisted my gut. When she didn't elaborate, I said, "I don't follow." I didn't *want* to follow. There was a feral look about her, like she was cornered, no escape in sight.

I stood bare chested and queasy, her khaki shorts and white T-shirt a preppy contrast to my ink. I should have been all over her, teasing her inner thighs with my fingers, getting her ready for me. Instead tension hung between us. And doom. I could sense it. Whatever she was about to say would be the final blow.

It was a sucker punch.

"Your father has been exercising at my gym. For a while. I didn't know who he was," she added quickly, talking over herself. "I swear, I didn't know. Then he was there today with your mother, and they admitted who they are. They are so torn up and sorry and want to make amends. Which means you

can't do this thing. You can't destroy them and the winery. They want you to run it again, with your brother."

The room swayed. Rachel knew my *fucking* parents and wanted me to work with them like nothing had happened? Like they hadn't committed fraud and booted me from their lives? A sharp pang slammed into my ribs, worse than sparring at the gym. How could she be on their side after everything I'd told her? Unless she'd been lying this whole time, toying with me.

My mind stilled. Eerily, almost. Something shifted, a sinking feeling that had me reliving the shittiest day of my life. The day Sophia had turned down my proposal.

I stepped back from Rachel, bile building. "You're telling me you've spent time with my parents and didn't tell me? That you didn't realize who they were?" *Lies. Lies. Lies.*

She sniffled. "No. I mean, *yes*...just your father at first, but he didn't—"

"You know the people who ruined my life, and you never mentioned it? Until what? Until you knew my actions would ruin their winery?" *Until she realized what she'd lose.* I barely recognized my voice—flat and detached, listing my thoughts as they formed. The pieces of her story slotted into place, taunting me with the truth.

I'd misjudged a woman again.

Calmness weighted my bones, a sudden quiet. Like my heart had simply stopped. "How long have you been planning this?"

She squinted at me. "Planning what?"

She was good, I'd give her that. I gestured wildly, one hand slashing through the air. "*This.* I mean, I swear to God, Rachel, you certainly had me fooled. Because that's what I do, I guess. Too damn trusting, like my grandfather. I just never fucking learn."

She reached out, but something in my glare had her yanking her hand back. "You're not making sense, but

whatever you think I did, you're wrong. I'd never hurt you. I..." Her brow crumpled. "I love you."

I winced, her words another harsh blow. God, how I'd wanted to tell her the same. Before her deception. Before my life came crashing down. "Bullshit," I said.

Her skin paled. "Excuse me?"

"*Bullshit*. Our relationship has been nothing but lies."

"What the hell are you talking about? Did that soccer ball hit you in the head?"

Her vehemence was a dagger in my heart, her deception suddenly clear. My body still craved her, needed her in a visceral way, one touch able to dull my turmoil, one kiss obliterating everything but us. It was all poison now.

There was nothing left to do but end this madness.

"You can stop pretending, because I get it—your glorious deceit." The timbre of my voice dropped, roughened with resentment. "You've been after a winery gig since before I met you. You somehow realized who I was at that first bar and thought you maybe had an in. Even asked me to give you a winery if you won our blind tasting. The idiot I am, I didn't clue in. Thought you were joking around. Looks like the joke's on me."

The scenes flipped through my mind, faster and faster. A wildfire surging. My accusations rose with the flames. "You worked me over, had me falling over myself to be with you, while you got to know my parents. You convinced them to let me back in the family business, so you'd end up sitting pretty, working the job you'd always wanted, the prestige of Offshoot Winery putting dollar signs in your eyes. I get it, Rachel. I fucking get it now. It's pretty smart, actually. Con the broken man with promises of love and affection. It's all so fucking clear."

I hadn't just misjudged her; I didn't know her at all. And I'd fallen hard. Harder than for Sophia, by a landslide, leaving me lied to and used again, treated like I was a means to an end.

I was an idiot.

Her eyes sparked, the innocence I loved darkened with malice. She poked a furious finger at my chest. “How dare you.”

I snorted, done with her lies. “Pretty sure I’m not the one in the wrong here.”

“Unbelievable.” She shook her head, like *I* was the traitor. “Did Sophia mess you up this badly? Are you so oblivious you think I’ve been hatching some secret plan to take over your winery? That’s beyond ridiculous.”

“What’s ridiculous is that I let myself be fooled again.”

She flung her arms in the air. “You’re a fool, all right. And an asshole. I made that winery crack at The Blue Door because Cameron mentioned something about it to Gwen. I didn’t know your name then, didn’t have a clue who you were. I can’t even believe what I’m hearing.”

“*Enough*,” I bellowed, the sound like a hammer on a bell.

Rachel’s shoulders shot toward her ears.

Mine caved forward. “Isn’t it enough?” My energy leached out, my arms loose at my sides. “Just admit what you did and we can both move on.”

A tear slipped down her cheek, the salty slide of it burning through my chest.

“I didn’t lie to you, Jimmy. I love you. I didn’t know who your father was until today, but I’ve grown to like him, and your mother is genuinely crushed. You’re just so stuck in your head, you can’t see it.”

God, she seemed sincere. And devastated, a quiet fury heating her blotchy cheeks. And love? I’d been consumed by my love for her the past weeks, keeping it in, letting it grow. Hearing her say the words was crushing. I couldn’t make sense of anything: her actions, my parents. The wrecking ball Sophia had swung boomeranging back for a final blow. *Me* possibly duped again. It was worse this time, a swell of betrayal knocking me off my feet. Because Rachel was everything. My head pounded—faster, harder—until the screaming pain nearly blinded me.

Even if she wasn't lying, Rachel knew how Sophia had manipulated me. I'd shared with her the details of my parents' betrayal—the tainted wines, my birthright yanked away, my father's swinging backhand and cruel words. She knew, yet she didn't care.

I blinked through the pain. “If you really didn't know who my parents were until today, then tell me who's side you're on, because it sounds like you're more upset about them, about me exposing *their* lies, than about the hell they put me through.”

Her chin trembled. More moisture shone in her eyes. “Yours,” she said hoarsely. “I'm always on your side, which is why I want you to give them a second chance. So you can heal.”

I could barely look at the woman I thought I loved. “It's like you don't even know me. Like you haven't listened to a word I've said the past months.”

“But that's the thing—I *have* heard you. I heard your voice when you talked about the winery, the longing and the heartache in it. That place is a part of you. Tearing it down will destroy any chance of returning there, of ever fixing things with your family. And I know your father is a stubborn grump...but he's also sweet. Once, at the gym, I was telling him about my boyfriend—*about you*. And he—”

“*Jesus*. I don't want to hear about the time you bonded with the asshole who told me I was a mistake. I'm not the mistake here, but you and I...” The air thickened in my throat. “You and I apparently are. I'm done with my family. Done with falling for the wrong women. This is just... I can't keep...” Breathing hard, I jabbed the toe of my sneaker into the floor. “You'd better go.”

Her tears streamed then, and I wanted to reach for her. Apologize and rewind. Tell her I loved her so much it hurt. It all felt so real, her anguish.

But if she truly loved me, she would stand by me when it counted. She wouldn't be here, begging me to forgive my parents and turn a blind eye to the wines they'd defiled. Her devastation was either an act to keep me and the winery she

craved, or her version of love needed an overhaul. Whatever her motivation, I was done being used. I was done always finishing last.

Never again would I let a woman close to my heart.

She walked toward the door, but stopped with her hand on the knob. She looked over her shoulder, eyes wet with tears and...something else. Something forlorn twisted her features, as though she were lost. “I never expected to meet a man like you. You made me better, made me feel so much. And this pain right now? It’s because of you, too. I love you more than I thought I could ever love another person. I’ve also never felt so betrayed. I’m not Sophia. You’re the one I care about, not your family or your money. But you’ve got the chance to fix things before it’s too late, and that’s a chance I never had. I know how much more *that* hurts than anything your parents said in anger. Don’t ruin it the way you just ruined us.”

With that she left. She didn’t slam the door. She walked out, stoic, but my fortitude slipped. It downright shattered. The finality of her words and the desolation on her face sent ice through my veins. The walls spun. They fucking tilted.

I dropped forward, hands to my knees. My temples pulsed with a strobe light of shame. I still couldn’t see the truth, couldn’t recognize a tree in the forest pressing closer. I had no clue if I was right or wrong or just plain stupid. I was sure I was over Sophia’s actions, past all that bullshit. Had I been deluding myself?

Everything was tangled—her, my parents, however the hell Rachel had met my father. I tried to picture him at the gym, but couldn’t imagine the man in sweats. He was always in slacks, thinning hair slicked back, dress shirts crisply ironed. If I didn’t feel like I was about to puke, the image would have been comical.

The contest was in three hours. That left one hundred and eighty minutes to figure out what to do. I grabbed my workout bag and boxing gloves, shooting out the door and peeling off on my bike to the gym.

When my first punch landed on the leather bag, the vibration rattled up my neck. I hit harder. And harder.

*Whack.* Sophia tearing out my heart.

*Whack.* My parents capsizing my life.

*Whack.* Rachel crying.

*Whack.* Rachel hurting.

*Whack.* Rachel walking out the door.

*Whack. Whack. Whack.*

I punched until my knuckles throbbed, pummeled the bag until I could barely hold up my arms. It took an hour before my mind began to clear. Thoughts I'd avoided for years got knocked loose, each memory more painful than the last. I'd buried them, thinking it was the only way to move on. All I'd done was let them fester, poison me. Air sliced through my lungs as I slumped on a bench, towel around my neck. Sweat dripped off my forehead.

Rachel must have been telling the truth. Too much had happened between us for it to all have been lies. She hadn't been taking their side, she'd been trying to do what she thought was best for me, so I didn't live with devastating regrets. I'd been too messed up to listen, to see.

I saw now.

A right hook to the jaw would hurt less.

There was only one way to make things right. I had to get her back; that wasn't optional. But I had to sort my life first. Stop running and deal with my family and my past.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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JIMMY

The sun lit my table, the outdoor café busy with friends sharing stories over espresso and biscotti. Two women beside me laughed, a nearby man and young girl chatted warmly. My impending get-together wouldn't be so blithe.

Especially not with how dead I felt inside.

However I'd suffered after Sophia, it didn't hold a candle to the past week. Eating had been a challenge, sleeping a write-off.

After that intense boxing session, I'd pushed into Crush and told Alonzo I was stepping down. The relief that crashed over me had flooded my chest. I hadn't realized how tense I'd been, that I'd been dreading following through with my plan. April took my spot and wound up beating the Schnozinator. Quite the win for her. Still, whatever release I'd achieved was short lived.

Since then, I'd powered through my shifts at Rudy's Tavern, my remaining hours spent on my bike or boxing, none of it easing the sting of hurting the woman I loved. Now I was meeting the person partly responsible for my bad decisions.

I noticed her heels first—four inches and bright red. Her legs were as shapely as I remembered, womanly curves showcased in a tight dress. Nowhere near as sexy as Rachel.

Nowhere near as classy. A familiar ache took root in my chest at the thought of her.

I looked up. “Thanks for coming.”

Sophia’s answering smile didn’t reach her eyes. “I don’t have much time.”

“This won’t take long.” Just long enough to work through the baggage I’d stored the past two years.

She sat, folding her hands on the table, making sure her rock of an engagement ring was front and center. The thing could sink a battleship.

A waiter asked for her order and she waved him off. No need to pretend we were old friends catching up.

I cleared my throat. “When you turned down my proposal, it sent me for a spin. I’ve fallen in love with someone else, but what went down between you and me has caused me to hurt her. There are some things I need to know.”

“The woman at the grocery store?” She studied my inked arms, the cuff on my wrist, my rings. Disbelief still shone.

“Yeah. Her.” My ray of sunshine. The woman who owned my heart.

The woman I’d devastated.

I sipped my espresso, the bitterness lingering on my tongue. Time to cannonball into the deep end. “Did you ever love me?”

I’d spent so long *not* thinking about Sophia and my relationship, I wasn’t sure what had been real, especially when my feelings for Rachel were a million times stronger than anything I’d felt for Sophia.

She met my eyes, a note of sadness in her blue gaze. “Initially. It was fun and exciting for a while, but the sneaking around got old.”

“It did.” We’d waited a while before telling our parents, knowing they wouldn’t approve. The illicitness had its appeal. “And after?”

She wiped stray crumbs from the table. “After, less so.”

Less so. Two damn words. I had never accused her of using me. She’d broken up with me, tossed my proposal in my face, and I hadn’t had the balls to ask her why. Back then, the timing told me all I needed to know. Her family had been struggling, more money going out than coming in, and she’d been looking to hitch a ride. Hearing her admit she’d used me would have made the fallout that much worse.

But I needed to hear the words now. Needed to learn if I’d assumed wrong or right, and she wasn’t making it easy.

“Thing is, Sophia, I’ve spent the last two years pretending I’m over what happened between us. Don’t get me wrong”—I raised a hand in defense—“this isn’t me looking for an in. We were wrong together, on a number of levels. Ending it was the right thing. This is about me having closure.”

A man walked by, taking an eyeful of her cleavage. She replied with a flirtatious smile, enjoying the attention. Sophia always loved to be admired. She shifted on her seat, discomfort appearing in her pinched brow. “At one point, I did love you, but later I realized you maybe didn’t love me. We both wanted something from each other.”

That had me leaning closer. “You wanted everything I came with, right? The winery? The security?”

She snorted. “Don’t say it like it’s evil. Yes, I wanted security and a comfortable life. It’s not a crime. People have married for a lot less.”

“Doesn’t make it right.”

“If I’m here so you can give me crap for what I did two years ago, I’m leaving. It sucks you’re still messed up, but I don’t have to sit through this.”

No, she didn’t. I didn’t want to extend this conversation any longer than needed, either. “What did you mean we *both* wanted something from each other?”

She cocked her head, the look on her face incredulous. “You really are clueless about yourself. As stubborn and as blind as your father ever was.”

“Tell me what you really think.”

She rolled her eyes at my sarcasm. “You used me as much as I used you, Jimmy. All you ever wanted was attention from your father, and if he wouldn’t give you affection, the next best thing was his anger. You wanted to marry me to get back at him. If you’d had the winery, I may have dealt with it. But why would I tie myself to a man with no prospects when it was clear I was a means to an end?”

I slumped in my chair, the wind sucked clean out of my lungs. *A means to an end*. I’d thought as much when recalling her treatment of me, and I couldn’t even deny her accusation. The night of the rainstorm, when Rachel and I had almost split up, she’d asked if I’d proposed to Sophia to aggravate my father. I wasn’t willing to listen then, cutting our conversation short.

I was all ears today.

I replayed my glee when telling my father about Sophia. How his face had purpled. How he’d made the time to talk—*yell*—at me weekly, trying to convince me to break things off. I’d reveled in it.

Marrying Sophia would have been the biggest mistake of my life, and if I’d still had the winery, that’s exactly what would have happened.

Losing it had saved me from that fate. My *father* had saved me from it.

I scrubbed my face, then shook my head. “I really fucked up.”

Sophia didn’t ask if I was referring to her or Rachel or my father. I was guilty, in some part, of sabotaging each relationship. With Rachel, the blame was mine alone.

“Anyway,” Sophia said, “is there anything else? I need to get going.”

Nothing, unless you included the mountain of apologies I owed Rachel, and the uncomfortable conversation I’d be having with my parents. “That’s it. And I’m sorry for my part in things. For not being honest with myself or you. I hope

you're happy." Any enmity I'd harbored vanished. We were two people with a tangled past, good memories and bad. Good choices and bad. Chances were, if we hadn't gone through the wringer, I might never have met Rachel.

Sophia held up her hand and wiggled her ring finger shamelessly. "Life is great."

I chuckled. At least she owned who she was.

Next up were my parents.



Their apartment building was clean and bright, the lobby filled with Turkish carpets, beveled mirrors, and Renaissance paintings. I gave my name to the concierge, who waved me along. By the time I got to their door, my resolve faltered. Two years was a long time to break contact, the chip on my shoulder practically cemented in place. Still, I had to start somewhere, find a way to open a discussion. Considering the contest fiasco, probably best if I began there.

My mother answered after the first knock. "Jimmy." Her dark eyes watered, and guilt suffocated me. Exactly why I'd avoided her all this time. One look was all it took.

But I was far from alone in what had gone down between us.

I'd texted her yesterday, asking for a meeting, and she'd replied in seconds. Now neither of us spoke. She didn't comment on my T-shirt or ratty jeans or ink, and I didn't tell her she still looked beautiful. Her hands lifted, like she wanted to hug me, then she stepped back.

I'd never have imagined my parents in a city apartment, but there was a wall of windows and high ceilings. Plants filled a space next to a desk. I'd figured they'd spend their retirement on the vineyard—my father's dream. But my mother had grown up in the city and missed the action and people. Looked like he put someone else first, for once.

My gaze shifted to the painting to my right. It hung alone, a light shining from above, highlighting rows of vines stretching into the distance. It wasn't particularly good. Crude, really, the perspective slightly off, muddy colors in the foreground. I'd painted it in high school and now it hung in their hall.

The urge to offer my mother that hug pulled at me. Instead I walked past her. Each *thunk* of my boots on their white floor echoed, the only other sound the swish and crinkle of a newspaper being read. My father. He'd lost more hair and looked thinner, his button-down creasing over protruding shoulders. Probably those hours at the gym.

"George." My mother passed me and sat in the chair beside his, helping fold his paper. "Jimmy's here."

I didn't imagine my visit was a surprise, but my father looked at me like I was a guest, someone interrupting his reading time. Already, I wanted to scream. Rail at him for never giving me attention. Never loving me like a father should love a son.

Tamping down my anger, I sunk into the white couch opposite them, legs apart, arms crossed. We stared at one another.

And I couldn't take it. They didn't get to sit here in their perfect apartment, with my painting on their wall, smothering me in silent guilt when they were as much to blame for our fallout as me. If one of us had to be the adult in this situation, looked like it was on me to buck up.

"I joined a contest a couple months back, that sommelier thing the Adriano brothers organized. Rachel and I got to know each other through it, but the real reason I was there was to leak the Cabernet issue. To tell critics you've been mislabeling wines."

My mother didn't flinch. She crossed her legs and smoothed her black pants, but she snuck a look at my father. His bushy eyebrows didn't budge. His mustache didn't twitch.

"We know," he said.

Rachel. It must have been Rachel. To warn them? To sabotage me? But the truth rang clear this time. She would have told them *for* me. To save the winery, hoping I'd find my way back there. My ribs nearly suffocated my heart.

"I didn't do it," I said. "I wanted to, but I couldn't follow through. Mainly because of Rachel. I bowed out of the contest and have done a lot of thinking the past week. Realized I played a part in what happened with our family. I'm still furious with you both, not sure we can move past it, but I'm tired of running."

Neither of my parents spoke. My father sat like a king on his throne.

My mother's lips thinned by the second. Then she hissed, "*George.*"

His eventual comment: "You are a coward."

I shot to my feet, one second from barreling out of there. "A coward mislabels wine to save his ass. A coward goes to hit his son because he lost *land*. A coward never apologizes for being an absentee parent." I jammed my fisted hands into my front pockets.

He sucked his teeth. "This is how it is? A son yelling at his father? It is disrespectful."

"This isn't 1950, and maybe you deserve to be yelled at. Shaken, in fact. Anything to open your eyes and see *me*. I am my own man. A damn good one, at that. No thanks to you."

He matched me glare for glare. "Your mother did not teach you to talk like this."

My mother was clutching the arms of her chair, gaze flitting between us, forever letting her boys fight their own battles.

My father was right, though. She'd taught me to sit straight and respect women and defer to my elders. *My pappous*. She'd handed me the building blocks of life and trusted I'd make something of myself. I'd done that, at least. Rachel wouldn't have fallen in love with a disrespectful failure.

“You’re right.” I extricated my hands to cross my arms. “I had a wonderful mother and grandfather, and a lot of what I am today is because of them. The stubborn side of me, the part that almost married the wrong woman to prove a point, is all you.”

I was on my feet, towering over him, but his glower made me feel two feet tall. Like nothing had changed. Like he’d continue to dominate my life. Force me back into my rut, the place where I’d work a dead-end job and ride my bike to forget the world. The place where Rachel and I couldn’t be together, because she deserved more than a man just existing.

Then my father did the unthinkable. He said, “I am sorry,” and I rocked on my heels.

He pushed out the words, his stubbornness unabated, and it should have been enough. I’d waited two years for his apology, but it barely made a dent.

“You are my son,” he went on. “I have always been hard on you. Pushed you. You are smarter than your brother, and I knew you could do more. But you were stubborn, too.”

“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” I replied, but my frustration dissipated. He’d never told me I was smart before. Never praised my intelligence or shown pride in my accomplishments.

When I’d earned my Master Sommelier title, he’d nodded and said, “Good.” I’d spent a year building a pile of flash cards a mile high, living and breathing wine, licking wet stone and eating under-ripe melon to develop my palate. He’d given me one fucking word.

Hearing a compliment now nearly knocked me over.

Still, the air between us was far from clear. “You told me I was a mistake and cut me out of the winery, and all you can say is it was because I was smart? Because you needed to push me? You’ll have to do better than that, or I’m walking back out that door.” Which wasn’t how I wanted this meeting to end. I was tired. This constant strife was a drain.

My energy waned until I sat on the couch, the cushion collapsing under my weight. We needed to resolve things, one way or another.

He grumbled under his breath, and Alena Giannopoulos kept her vigil, leaving us men to duke it out. That simple act had me grinding my molars.

Until my father coughed. The phlegmy sound lasted a good ten seconds. I frowned at my mother, who left and came back with water. That call a while back, she'd mentioned to Rachel he was unwell. He'd been attending the gym, that much I knew. But the rest? He could have cancer and I wouldn't be any wiser.

Suddenly, I wanted to know. Find out if he was ill and do something to help. He wasn't getting any younger.

Once he recovered, he faced me. "What I said was wrong. You are my pride. My heart. What I did, I did because I love you. That Sophia girl was trouble. If it meant stopping that wedding, I would do the same again."

Still bullheaded as always, but the anger I'd nursed for years bled out. With Sophia today, the why of his actions had become clearer, but hearing him say it hit home. As did hearing the word *love*. Not a term my father used loosely. He loved me enough to hurt me. Fucked up, maybe, but I was worried I'd end up like him, cold and unfeeling. In truth, he felt a lot more than he let on. He wouldn't win Father of the Year, but I was emotionally exhausted. If forgiving him meant coming up for air and finding my way back to Rachel, I'd take his olive branch.

"I'm sorry, too—for my part. Dating Sophia was me lashing out at you, which wasn't okay. If I'd married her, it would have been for the wrong reasons and I would have regretted it. I actually saw her today."

Another flash of anger clouded his face. "You should not see her. Rachel is the sort of woman a man marries, not that Sophia girl."

I was the last person he needed to convince. Unfortunately, I let that ship sail and broke my compass. “You don’t have to worry about me reconnecting with Sophia. I just needed to sort some things out. And yes, Rachel is amazing. I love her and plan on fighting for her, but it’ll take a miracle to get her back.”

He grunted his approval, quite the honor from him.

My mother’s eyes shone. “She’s wonderful, Jimmy. Such a sweet woman. I have to believe she’ll forgive you, in time. I owe you an apology as well. I should have jumped in when things got heated, at least forced this conversation earlier. It was poor judgment on my part, but your father and I have talked a lot, and we’d love nothing more than for you to come back to the winery. Dimitri wants that, too. He actually wanted to be here today, but we asked him to allow us this time. Is that something you want? To rejoin the family business?”

In some ways it was too little too late, but I’d opened up to Rachel, talking about the land and the grapes, unaware how much I’d missed it. Not just any vineyard. *My* vineyard. The one where my grandfather had taught me to test the fruit and smell the air. The one where I’d sipped my first Cabernet Sauvignon.

Yes, I wanted to work that land, but only under one condition. “Not with the current winemaker. Not by breaking the rules. If I came back, things would have to change.”

My mother smiled, rueful. “Dimitri forced the issue a year ago. We kept Alex on staff, but your brother insisted we fix his recipe. Dimitri has met a lovely woman, Natalia, and they’re getting married next summer, at the winery. She’s been wonderful for him.”

I planted my elbows on my knees and shook my head, unsure when my little brother had become a man. He’d stopped cutting corners, had fallen in love, and I’d missed it all. I’d also almost destroyed our business when they’d already righted their wrongs. More apologies to give. More fences to mend.

I was ready for it. “Then it looks like we’ll have a lot to discuss. I have other plans, too—events I want to host in Napa, including being part of the Healing Hearts luncheon. Rachel’s mother is a volunteer and I’ve been helping her. I’ll come to the valley in a few weeks and talk to Dimitri. We’ll go from there.”

My mother pressed her lips together, tears welling, and I couldn’t keep my distance. I pushed to my feet and pulled her into a hug, letting her cry against my chest. My own emotions burned behind my eyes. She still smelled like lilac, the soft scent returning me to days helping her in the garden and cleaning up after a meal. I missed her. It was as simple as that. We still had talking to do, but holding a grudge hadn’t exactly worked in my favor.

“Is Dad okay?” I whispered in her ear. He wouldn’t like me asking after his health. Headstrong until his last breath.

She patted my back. “Fine. High blood pressure, but the exercise is helping.”

I released her, and she wiped the corners of her eyes. My father stood, and we shared a handshake. He’d never been a hugger.

As I headed for the door, he called my name. I turned to catch another scowl. “No more tattoos, yes?”

“I was planning on getting one on my face,” I replied, leaving before he could throw a fit.

Probably not the best joke for his blood pressure.

I should have felt a thousand pounds lighter, but I was still heavy with thoughts of Rachel. Winning back the love of my life wouldn’t be easy. I’d treated her like shit. Insulted her. If I were Gwen or Ainsley, I’d warn her to keep her distance. Tell her dating me would only end in heartache.

But Rachel and me—we were legendary. We were meant to be together, and I’d do whatever I needed to prove my worth. Matter of fact, there was one thing in particular that would blow her mind. Something that would prove how serious I was, whether she chose to forgive me or not.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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RACHEL

“I’m a bad person,” Ainsley said. Her back was, *thankfully*, to me as she dried her hair, the gym locker room empty except for her, Gwen, and me. Ainsley liked to dry her hair topless, nothing but a towel around her waist. Talking to her boobs always made me uncomfortable.

I knotted my towel around my chest. Snugly. “You’re one of my best friends, so technically, you *can’t* be bad.”

“Did you kick a puppy today?” Gwen asked. “Trip an old lady on purpose?”

“No. Seriously.” Ainsley ran a brush over her last section of hair, her honeyed strands billowing like a shampoo ad. She shut off the drier and faced us. “If karma is a real thing, I’m going to end up so screwed.”

Boobs. All I could think was: Boobs.

Gwen wasn’t fazed. “Is this about Emmett? Because he turned you down?” She dropped her towel and pulled on her thong. *Only* her thong.

“No,” Ainsley said, but she smirked. “You were right, though. The guy is a one-man pride parade. I never had a chance.” Her smile slipped. “It’s just, I love being a personal shopper. I really do. But I’m contributing to the downfall of society.”

Gwen tousled her hair, a quick flick of her fingers that had every wave landing just right. I ran my fingers through my straight strands, but it reminded me of Jimmy's hand in my hair, his nails dragging along my scalp.

Everything reminded me of him, including the piercing I'd gotten last week. The event had involved me jumping out of the chair five times, while Gwen rolled her eyes and I panicked and the piercing guy laughed, but I did it. Every time I looked at the hoop through my belly button, a thrill rushed through me. I'd signed up for motorcycle classes, too. I was finally owning my inner bad girl.

Without the man who'd helped me find her.

"You may not be contributing to world peace," Gwen said, "but I don't see how your job is setting back humanity."

We brought our makeup bags to the counter, mascara and blush studiously applied. Me between my half-naked friends. Images of Jimmy spun like a broken record through my mind, so I kept quiet, their conversation rolling without me.

"I buy gifts for mistresses," Ainsley said. "I'm helping men cheat on their wives."

Gwen cringed, pausing mid-mascara application. "It is pretty shady."

"Exactly! If I don't redeem myself, I'll get visited by the Ghost of Christmas Past, and I do *not* want to relive my high school days."

"So change jobs. Take a page from Rachel's book and start fresh."

"Aside from the fact that I need the money, I like what I do...just not that aspect of it. And are you ignoring me, Rachel? Because this silent treatment isn't cool."

Before I could answer, Gwen snickered. "She's just uncomfortable. She hates talking to us when we're topless."

"Yep," I said, but their nakedness wasn't the only thing stealing my speech. These days, if I opened my mouth, I'd lament about how confused I was. And sad. Really sad. I was

tired of my voice. “Just can’t focus when ‘the girls’ are out. They are that distracting.”

Ainsley stepped into her jean skirt and made a show of shaking her shoulders (and breasts) before getting dressed. “I consider it a compliment. But back to my disreputable life. I need to make a change. Not become some born-again do-gooder who gives her savings to charity and lives off smiles and happiness, but...I don’t know. Contribute more, maybe?”

Her tone was light, but her face was pensive, like the day we’d had our smoothies and she’d asked if I thought the post-wish blackout was odd. I was no longer sure the event had been a magical twist of fate. I’d be returning to school in August. My tuition hadn’t been paid yet, but I’d been accepted, which meant my resolution was nearly complete. I expected the enchanted power outage to somehow polish the rest of my life. Outside of school, my life didn’t feel particularly shiny.

“What about volunteering?” I asked, forcing my focus back to Ainsley. Whether this was about her wish or not, her frustration was palpable. “Something to make you feel like you’re helping.”

She pushed at her cuticles. “Could be smart, but animal shelters spike my allergies, and working in a soup kitchen isn’t my thing. You know how I get around meat.”

Her vegan-loving self would toss her cookies at the sight of a chicken bone. “Would you consider construction? There are always Habitat for Humanity projects. I know of one going on.”

Because Owen had mentioned one such project the day Jimmy and I had broken up.

My mind often traveled to that time, and many before it, snagging on details like a fisherman desperate for a catch. I couldn’t see a motorcycle without my belly tumbling, couldn’t glimpse a tattoo or dark hair or ripped jeans or belt buckles or leather jackets without fantasizing, wishing Jimmy were waiting for me, at home, with nothing on but a wicked smile.

The cavity in my chest widened. It had been four weeks, and the man was nothing if not persistent—calling constantly, sending emails and texts.

Jimmy: I'm sorry, Ray. So damn sorry.

Jimmy: You're my sunshine, baby. Let me make things right.

Jimmy: You deserve the world. I will prove how wrong I was.

I never replied. Ainsley, however, did. Her text read: *Message her again, and a Candiru fish will appear in your toilet bowl.*

He didn't relent, and I read his words greedily.

"That Habitat thing isn't the worst idea," Ainsley said, wrenching me from my depressing thoughts. "Construction guys are hot."

Owen certainly was. Devastatingly handsome, really. But not as sexy as my bad boy. I clacked my molars together, reminding myself he was no longer mine. "If I were still with Jimmy, I could have helped—his friend volunteers at a site. But I bet it's easy to research online."

The notion forced a much-needed grin to my face. I'd once witnessed Ainsley swear like a truck driver after smearing dirt on her white stilettos. Stick her high-fashion self on a construction site, and she'd be liable to break a nail and breathe fire. Video footage would be necessary.

Gwen zipped her gym bag. "Don't let them give you power tools. I'm not picking you up from the hospital." Then to me, "Any news on the Jimmy front?"

We gathered our stuff and headed for the door, me trailing behind. "He's as persistent as ever, but I haven't replied yet. It's not that I hate him for what he said or can't find a way to forgive him. I'm just...I don't know. I feel stuck."

Before his onslaught of texts, he'd sent me a note, long and eloquent. He'd explained how messed up he'd been, stuck in

the past, stubborn to the last. He even told me about an eye-opening conversation with Sophia (*Banana-fana fo-phia*). It all made sense.

When with Jimmy, I couldn't mention Sophia without being met by a brick wall, and the reason he'd joined the contest proved he hadn't dealt with his issues. He'd twisted the situation with me and his parents, and had transposed all that negative energy on yours truly. It sucked. Like *eat a bag of gummy bears and inhale a pint of rum raisin* sucked. The girls had even taken me to a bar and pinned his picture on a dart board. Excellent therapy.

He'd since apologized to the moon and back, and I wasn't one to hold a grudge. Still, I couldn't reply. Not to yell at him. Not to ask him to stop. Not to forgive him or tell him I dreamed about him nightly, and that I'd gotten into my Viticulture program and was excited and couldn't wait to pick courses and learn all things wine and finally have a career I loved. I couldn't break my silence, and I didn't know why.

He hadn't given up, *yet*. If that time came, I wasn't sure what I'd do.

"Anyway," I said, "there's too much going on to focus on him. I'm picking courses soon, and the luncheon is this weekend."

Gwen stopped, and I nearly slammed into her. "Are you wearing that hot outfit I bought you?"

I shoved her forward. "I am. My mother might have a cow, but I don't care. I feel sexy in it."

"You are sexy, in that and in your sweats."

We made our way to the street, and I scanned the road for a motorcycle, as usual. When I didn't see Jimmy, disappointment rolled over me. I'd have to sort through my feelings soon.



For the next few days, I continued on in my indecisive haze. A dimmer had been set to my world, removing the bounce from my step, the cackle from my laugh. My mother's luncheon was a welcome distraction.

The Healing Hearts function was in full swing, the outdoor tent swathed in pink, gray, and white flowers. Original paintings were showcased against the sides, each in memoriam of someone lost to heart disease, all up for silent auction. My mother had commissioned one for my father—a sailboat cresting a wave, conquering the seas. He'd have loved it.

I smiled for what felt like the first time this decade. As I took in the space, my mood brightened further, and when I noticed the drink stations, my heartrate rocketed, each beat pounding to the jazz band's drumline.

Just as Jimmy had suggested, five displays had been set up, each hosting a different wine. No labels were visible, only blind pours offered. Guests swirled and sipped and squinted, trying to guess the grapes, even the years and wineries. I doubted many would come close, but their enjoyment was obvious. The activity was the perfect way to loosen up the crowd, and their wallets. The concept was brilliant.

Jimmy must have been helping my mother with the event, even after we'd broken up. If he'd been struggling as much as his texts suggested, *as much as I had been*, working with my mother, who'd never breathed a word of their communication, would have been challenging. But he hadn't backed out, because he was a good man. A man whose emotions had gotten the better of him, but that meant he was passionate. And fiery. And sensitive.

And worth fighting for.

Which is exactly what I suddenly wanted to do: fight for him. Because a life without that kind of electricity was no life at all.

Thanks to my mother, I'd paid my tuition this morning, but the act had lacked a certain thrill. Not calling Jimmy to share the news had been excruciating, his daily absence diluting my enjoyment of everything. He was sunshine, not me. I was a

grape thirsting to ripen, his energy my life's blood, and I was done putting him off.

My mother, unfortunately, chose that moment to nearly careen into my side. "Laura Ketlar has done nothing but take credit for my work. Ordering the rentals doesn't mean she singlehandedly"—she waved an impatient hand through the air—"organized the event. She didn't lift a finger to help with the grunt work."

As hard as I tried to listen, my heart had migrated to my throat, my need to escape and call my bad boy all consuming, but the fundraiser was a big deal. My mother needed my support. "Well, I'm impressed. You've outdone yourself this year."

She scanned the space, one eyebrow expertly raised. "The caterers are a server short. They thought they'd slip it past us. The whole thing is shameful, really."

That and the unrest in the Middle East. "No one has noticed, and look how many people have bid on Dad's painting. The whole thing is a success."

She squeezed my elbow. "You're right, as usual. It's just taken so much time and—" She stopped midsentence and scrutinized my wrist. "Is that a rash, Rachel? Is your purse on you? Use some cortisone right away and again tonight. If it's not better in a day or two, make an appointment with Dr. Rancor."

"On it," I said. No need to share that it was a mosquito bite. Why rob her of her daily dose of overreacting?

A trait that had her examining my choice of wardrobe. "And that outfit is way too revealing. This isn't a costume party."

"That's a shame. I was counting on winning the Most Likely to Get Arrested for Prostitution costume award." I could only imagine how she'd react to my piercing.

"Honestly, Rachel. You and your brother will be the death of me. And did you hear Piper Lewis named her daughter Feather? Of all the things."

She ran with her new topic, and I didn't bother keeping up. I glanced at my legs, admiring their length in my heels and short skirt. No, my outfit didn't blend with the pantsuits and cocktail dresses adorning the crowd. The notion only heightened my confidence. If anything, I felt sexier. Jimmy would have stood out, too, if he were here. All rough and inked, drawing curious looks from the guests. He would have had *me* hypnotized.

"Ma," I said, interrupting her rant. "If Jimmy and I were still together, would you have given him a hard time, too? You know, asked that he dress a certain way, have him cover his ink?"

She placed her hands on both of my cheeks, sending her shoulders pads near her ears. "You're my girl, and I'm sorry for what I said. You look beautiful today. I'm just stressed and nitpicking." She patted my cheek and released me.

The compliment was lovely, but she'd avoided my question. "What about Jimmy, Ma? When I was with Gabe, you banned us from your parties. Would having Jimmy here have made you uncomfortable?" Her answer didn't matter. It wouldn't sway me from my decision to accept Jimmy's apology, but it would be nice to know she'd have welcomed him here.

Her reply came slowly. "When you were with Gabe, I'd been going through a tough time. Most of my friends were friends of convenience, and I never really felt like I fit in. I took some of that out on you. Things are different now. I've met wonderful women through this organization, and Jimmy is nothing like that Gabe boy."

I held my breath, nosy and nervous. "So you like Jimmy? I mean, it looks like you've been working with him on this event, so I'm guessing you've spent time with him."

Her eyes sparkled, like when she'd passed me my tuition check, pride in her glowing smile. "When I first saw Jimmy, I only saw his rough exterior, and those...tattoos. Afterward, I saw a strong man who was led by his emotions. A potentially dangerous combination, but Jimmy has a heart of gold. Your

father would have liked him, too. I'd be proud to have him here."

"Really?" I couldn't fight the scratchiness in my throat. I'd stopped listening to my father's voicemail as of late, waiting on advice that would never come, but her admission meant the world. I'd have been proud, too, and honored and thrilled to have him at my side.

I wanted him here with me now.

"Yes, really," my mother replied as she waved to a friend. "Jimmy is smart and creative, and his knowledge of wine is astounding." One foot forward to mingle, she added, "You should enjoy yourself today. I hear the souvlaki is something special."

She winked, leaving me speechless and slightly creeped out. (Reminder to self: never discuss sex with my mother.) Her inappropriate comment also had my heart thundering. My eyes flitted around, sure Jimmy and his "souvlaki" were here. My neck tingled, just below my ear, a place he'd often worshipped, with his tongue and teeth and lips. I touched the spot, shaking slightly.

Was he watching me now?

As if on cue, a deep voice curled from behind me. "That outfit should be illegal."

So should his rumbling baritone. I stood, faced forward, my body alive with desire. "Just something I picked up."

I wanted to see myself through his eyes. My calves lifted by my high heels. The curve of my spine revealed through the dipping fabric. I wanted to see *him*. See if his eyelids had lowered like they did when he was aroused. Check if his jaw had slackened.

"I'd like to strip it off you." His hot breath hit my ear. Goose bumps cascaded down my neck.

Holy hell. Four weeks. It had been four weeks of confusion and longing, and now he was here, just behind me. I imagined us in a game of trust, those team building exercises where I'd have to fall and believe he'd catch me. And I did. If

I gave up my balance and let go, I had no doubt he'd latch his arms around me and hold tight.

Unable to resist a glance, I peeked over my shoulder and whimpered. He was in dark jeans and boots, his gray button-down shirt tucked in, a purple vest stretched over his chest, thin black tie disappearing below. Wild hair. Dark scruff. Cuffs rolled to his elbows, all that glorious ink on display. The clincher was his eyes—hope and love and regret swirled in ribbons of blue.

I was done for.

“You're not exactly dressed to blend in,” I said. “Are you trying to distract me?”

“Is it working?”

“Maybe.” *Definitely.*

“All is fair in love and lust, then.”

“Isn't it ‘love and war’?”

“This isn't war, Sunshine. It's many things, but it isn't war.”

Except he'd laid siege to my heart, the delicate tissue surrounded and blockaded, nothing moving in or out but memories of us. Some days it was hard to function.

Instead of stepping beside me, he pressed closer to my back and laid his large hands on my hips. “You really do look stunning.” His breath grazed my ear again, and I nearly melted.

“So do you,” I replied, and, God, I wanted to touch him. I couldn't take not facing him.

Belly aflutter, I went to swivel, but he held me firm. I'd been frozen since our fight, unable to make a move, but now I knew what I wanted. Namely, *him*. My arms around his waist, my head against his chest, his heartbeat pounding in my ears. He was having none of it.

He pulled me tighter to him. “How about a wager?”

“I could be tempted.” As long as the bet revolved around which of us got naked first.

“I’m sure you could, and I’ll even let you set the stakes.”

“Without knowing the game?”

He pressed his lips to my temple. “I won’t lead you astray, Ray. I love you.”

A shiver ran down my spine, his beseeching voice guiding the sensation. “You love me?”

“For so long. I should have said it sooner, but I fucking love you. So much it hurts. You own my heart.”

Aside from his ten thousand texts, we hadn’t talked through our problems, but his confession had my limbs tingling, heat radiating through my body. My life had turned around in the past months. I had a future filled with wine and learning, and I couldn’t wait to be an aunt. My mother was still overbearing and difficult, but she supported my choice of career and men.

It was time to keep moving forward and give Jimmy a second chance. “I love you,” I whispered. “So much it hurts.”

He spun me, so quickly I gripped his shoulders to keep from toppling. Tenderness softened the steel in his blue-gray eyes. “I’m sorry. The things I said to you were horrible. I’d take them back if I could. I know you, Ray. I know you’d never use me or side against me. Even thinking how I lit into you makes me sick. I’m not sure I deserve your forgiveness, but I’m done burying my past. It’s part of me. The good and the bad. I want nothing more than for you to be my future.”

God, his sincerity. It coated every word and soothed my bruised heart. A balm I was ready to accept. “It’s okay. I understand. But you ever accuse me of stuff like that again, assume the worst without a discussion, and an apology won’t cut it. This is a one-time deal.”

He straightened, fierceness in the sharp lines of his face. “As it should be.”

We stood like that a moment, and I could sense his need, both of us fighting the pull to grab each other and kiss until we'd erased our pain. My gaze fell to his tie, the silky fabric, wondering how it would feel around my wrists. Maybe a little pain wouldn't be so bad.

He dug his thumbs into my hipbones, possessive and hot as hell. "Don't worry, I'll string your arms up with it later."

"Presumptuous much?" But the man could read me. And sweet Jesus, the visual. My skin nearly lit on fire.

"Just calling it like I see it. And you, Sunshine, have it bad for me."

Suddenly parched, I scanned the area for a glass of water. A sprinkler to run through? Then I was picturing a dripping wet Jimmy, and I could barely swallow. "Let's get back to this contest of yours."

People milled around, curious glances coasting over us. Jimmy and his ink garnered much interest, as did my revealing skirt and halter top. They could look all they wanted.

He winked. "A blind tasting, of course."

"Back to where we started?" *Our second chance.* He nodded, but staying among these people when he could be apologizing in private lacked appeal. "Can this game wait until later? I believe your tongue has more atoning to do. Certain places on my body haven't decided if you're forgiven. It could take weeks."

He chuckled and nestled his hand into the small of my back. "I've missed you like crazy, and not kissing you right now, everywhere, is killing me, but I want to do this right. It won't take long."

Grudgingly, I yielded. He led me to one of the stations, where I promptly downed a glass of water. That's when I recognized April in her black slacks and top, pouring wines.

"You won!" My shout had glances flying my way, but I hadn't seen her since I'd been booted from the contest. We weren't exactly close, but she'd always been nice, and beating the Schnozinator was no easy feat.

She beamed. “I did. Thanks to Jimmy. If he hadn’t stepped down, I wouldn’t have had the chance.”

“Well, it’s nice of you to help today.”

“Like I said, I owe him. He even got a bunch of my friends work. Vesper closing down left a lot of people in the lurch.”

*The club where I’d met Jimmy.* Disappointment weighted me. I would have loved to revisit Vesper with him, explain how a mysterious power outage had propelled me to fulfill my wish. I may have questioned the wisp of magic I’d felt that night, but I couldn’t deny it now. I mean, here I was, the day I’d paid my tuition, finally ready to forgive Jimmy and move forward.

Ready for love.

This was the domino of happiness I’d hoped for.

“I can’t believe it closed.”

April rolled her eyes. “The place was a death trap. Blackouts every couple weeks. Electrical problems. They couldn’t afford to fix it.”

She excused herself to serve patrons, and I stared dumbly ahead.

Jimmy slid his hand across my waist. “You okay?”

I wasn’t sure. I’d waffled about the “magical” blackout on and off since my birthday, but the possibility of its legitimacy had led to that horrible butt shot. It had pushed me to enter the sommelier contest. It was why I’d enrolled in school. Believing the wish would knock the rest of my life in order had spurred me on, when all I ever really needed was to *believe in myself*.

Talk about being clueless. “I’m fine. Just surprised about the club. So…” I looked around, feeling lighter than I had in weeks. Magic hadn’t led me here. I’d led me here. “Where’s this mysterious blind tasting?”

He moved behind the table and placed one glass on the white tablecloth. With the same grace he’d displayed in the contest, he poured a mysterious white wine into the crystal—

elegant movements for such a rough man. The alcohol swished and clung to the sides, its legs dripping downward. When my father had told me the alcohol bleed left on a glass was known as “legs,” I’d rolled my eyes, sure he was lying. Today their sexy drag left me breathless.

Mischief in his smirk, Jimmy pushed the glass toward me, along with a pen and piece of paper. “One wine. One taste. If you guess the name of the wine and the vineyard, you win. If you don’t, you lose. First you have to set the stakes. Write them down. I won’t look until it’s over.”

“Any limitations?”

“No.” Then his hand shot up. “Actually, one. It can’t involve Ainsley and her vicious forms of torture.”

I snickered. “Condition accepted.”

I swirled the glass, the light transforming the liquid from straw to gold. Offering forgiveness was easy, simple words spoken, acceptance to ease Jimmy’s mind. But actions spoke louder than words. Jimmy had explained what he’d done and why, offering so many apologies he was in danger of losing his Man Card. If I entered our second chance unsure, waiting for him to mess up again, neither of us would win. He’d acted like an asshole, he’d hurt me, and we still had much to discuss. A discussion that should come from a place of security, for both of us, which meant taking a risk.

A totally massive risk, but destiny, apparently, was mine to make.

Before I could reconsider, I wrote my stakes and folded the paper, edges matching up. I placed it aside, perpendicular to the table. I lined up the pen, too.

The second I let go, Jimmy nudged the pen askew.

I returned it. He nudged it again. I glared at him, and he winked.

“I’d like to change the wager,” I said.

He snatched the paper and pocketed it. “Not a chance.”

God, he was difficult. And cute, smiling like he was. Time to taste some wine.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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JIMMY

Rachel lifted the glass to her nose, and I could almost smell each teasing note. I wanted to get drunk on *her* heady scent. Standing this far was torture, every inch of my body craving a taste of her, a touch, an inch to savor. Anything. But I had more say.

She swished the wine around her mouth and swallowed, the length of her neck opening up as she tipped her head back. I stared, unabashed, taking in the necklace that dipped between her cleavage. Her leopard-print skirt was criminal, her mile-long legs smooth and perfect. Legs I'd rather have wrapped around my head.

Heat flooded my groin.

Another swirl of her glass. Another sip. Then a sly grin tipped up one corner of her mouth. "You didn't think I'd recognize your family's Windswept Chardonnay? What kind of novice do you take me for?"

"Maybe I was looking to lose." Except I had no idea what I'd be losing. This was about handing Rachel control. I could apologize all I wanted, beg for another chance, claim I'd never hurt her again, but if she didn't believe me, we'd never work. Trust was paramount. So this was both of us tasting blind, feeling the other out. But if she ignored my Ainsley condition, I'd have to book a one-way ticket to Siberia. Fucking terrifying, that one.

Before I removed the paper from my pocket, I pulled the bottle in question from below the table and hid the label with my hand. “You guessed right, but we’ve rebranded it. We’re tweaking the recipe, too. That will develop in time, but the plan is to make it our flagship wine, grow the business around it.”

“Do I get to see this flashy new label?” She rubbed her hands together, eager. Clueless to what I’d done.

If I’d gone too far, if she wasn’t ready, there was a chance I’d scare her off, but I still had to man up, put my heart on my sleeve. No bluffing about who I was or how I felt.

Swallowing hard, I revealed my masterpiece, and she sucked in her breath. We were at a charity function, people milling everywhere, but it was like the edges had faded into darkness, a spotlight separating us from the crowd.

“Is that what I think it is?” she asked.

I offered a tentative nod. “It’s you.”

She yanked the bottle from me and had that look about her, like she wanted to press it against her breasts and stare at it for weeks and assign it a permanent location in her alphabetized wine fridge. I rubbed the back of my neck, tension ebbing.

She ran her fingertips over the wine’s new name, *Sunshine Chardonnay*. A crude drawing of the pond we’d picnicked at filled the label. She blinked, and a tear slid down her cheek. Last time she cried, it was because I’d said unforgivable things. These tears made my heart squeeze in a different way.

“I can’t believe you did this,” she whispered.

I wanted to round the table and kiss her tears away, but it wasn’t time yet. “I plan to do much more for you.” I jutted my chin toward the bottle. “Read the description.”

Lip tucked between her teeth, she flipped it over. Her chin trembled as she scanned the words. I didn’t need to read them. I’d written each one.

*Sunshine is a ripe wine full of life. It may change, depending on the year and seasonal conditions, but it will always brighten your day. Nurtured with love, its hints of spice set it apart, its creamy mouthfeel decadent, every nuance a taste to savor. And Sunshine's legs are a thing of beauty. Our flagship Chardonnay is an expression of who we want to be.*

Shaking her head, she wiped at her eyes. "You made my mascara run."

"Sorry?"

"Don't apologize."

"Not sorry?"

Exasperated, she crushed the bottle against her chest, going for the boob rub after all. "This is the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me. I have my own wine."

"Yeah. Okay. But maybe save the full-body contact for later." My dirty princess was drawing a crowd.

"Need I remind you that *you're* supposed to be the wild one? Stop smothering me."

I planted my hands on the table and leaned toward her. "I plan to smother you plenty. Later. For now, we have a wager to complete."

Huffing out a playful breath, she clutched the bottle and crooked her finger, beckoning me to follow. I did, magnetically. I'd have trailed her to the ends of the Earth, if she asked. She led us to a quiet corner of the tent, behind a divider. The noise dulled, jazz tunes fading to swirling notes. She turned and pulled me against her.

"This is too much." She clutched my tie, face pleading... *for what?*

"It's not enough, Ray. One apology, a thousand, would never be enough, because you're it for me. I need you to know

I'm willing to build my world around you. You make me want to do better, be better. You're my sunshine."

I lifted the bottle from her hands and placed it on the ground. She didn't release my tie, so the whole thing was awkward, my upper body twisting while I reached down. I chuckled, but my laugh faded once I had her in my arms. "I'm a passionate guy, which means I might make some bad choices from time to time. It also means I'll love you fiercely. I'll also grovel. Whatever it takes to make amends. I won't bury things again. Consider it a hard lesson learned." I lowered my lips until they ghosted over hers. "Will you forgive me?"

"I already did."

"Say it again. Then I'll apologize again. I'll do it until I've erased all your doubts."

Instead of answering, she tugged my tie, and our lips connected in our corner of the world. The back of her top dipped low. So low, I slipped my fingers inside. Skin as smooth as velvet greeted me.

Her mouth was eager against mine, and *fuck*, she tasted like apples and sunshine and lemonade. She tasted like Chardonnay and a future we'd build together. We moved against each other, mouths wet, tongues tangoing with sensual groans. I was hard already, my fancy jeans about to split a seam, but I pulled back, aching. I had to. Any longer and Rachel's mother would never show her face in this crowd again.

Rachel flattened her hands on my chest. "Did I win?"

I blinked a few times until her meaning registered. "That's up to you." When she frowned, I went on, "Technically, you won. You knew it was an Offshoot Chardonnay, but since the name of the wine is different, you can claim a loophole."

I didn't know what wager she'd written, had no idea if winning or losing would bode well for us. This was me handing her control again. I was hers to keep or discard. I'd live with the fallout.

“Win,” she said, releasing my tie and smoothing it down. “I win. But you might not like my prize. So I offer you the same loophole. If it’s too much, you can shoot me down.”

*Well, then.* Curiosity nipping at me, I reached into my pocket and pulled out her neatly folded paper. She knotted her fingers in an anxious twirl.

Ready or not...

Her letters were straight and neat—typical Rachel—words that blockaded my throat and compressed my ribs. Words I hadn’t dared hope for.

“You mean it?” I asked.

“I do. I love you, Jimmy.”

I reread her chosen prizes:

*If I win, we move in together. If you win, we move in together.*

My heart damn near exploded. I wasn’t sure I deserved a woman like Rachel, but I’d spend a lifetime trying. I refolded the note and tucked it away. “I’m keeping this under lock and key. There’s no backing out now.”

“No loophole, then?”

“Are you kidding? It took me ages to get a sleepover. You’re stuck with me, Sunshine.”

“With Superglue,” came her reply. Then she said, “I got a piercing.”

*Come a-fucking-gain?* “Where?” I grabbed her hips, my grip a little too strong. *A fucking piercing.*

Her shy smile nearly split me in two. “I’ll show you later.”

Wound up and horny as hell, I kissed her hard, trying to figure out where I’d find that little piece of metal. Her nipple? Belly button? Lower? I growled into her mouth when two women walked by, horrified whispers shared. I could barely see straight.

I tugged Rachel toward the main room, her lips swollen and well-kissed, mine hungry for more. We could have taken off and finished what we started, but I wanted to see the look on her face when my bid won her mother's commissioned painting. It would be the first piece of art hung in *our* place.

Under the framed quote I'd recently purchased:

“If you obey all the rules, you miss all the fun.” ~  
Katharine Hepburn

## EPILOGUE



### THREE MONTHS LATER

RACHEL

“We should do this weekly.” My head was on Jimmy’s lap, our pond in front of us, birds singing above.

“Sorry, Sunshine. No dice.” He stretched like a cat. The sexiest feline I’d ever known. “This is a celebration, which means you’d have to enroll in a new program. Start a different career. Actually...that wouldn’t be a challenge for you.”

“Still a comedian.”

Shifting, he pulled me between his legs, my back to his chest. “I could even help you come up with new ventures.”

I nuzzled closer. “Like what?”

“Since you have a Big Bird fetish, you could host those furry conventions. The ones where people dress up as fluffy toys and get it on.”

I rammed my elbow into his side. “Hilarious.”

Locking me tighter between his legs, he pushed his nose through my hair. His wet lips landed on my neck. “How about we stick to viticulture, then?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Especially if every aced test became a celebration with wine, cheese, and us fucking like rabbits under a blue sky. It had been quite a day.

He pressed a kiss to my jaw. “I’m proud of you.”

I was proud of me, too. Since my first class two months ago, I’d attacked my course load head-on—sitting front row, scribbling furious notes. I was ahead on readings and had upped mine and Jimmy’s tastings at home. I was going to rock my degree.

In this moment, though, all I wanted was Jimmy tangled around me like a grapevine, our special picnic spot quiet but for the frogs and insects and birds.

He stroked my legs leisurely. I leaned my head into his neck as the day slipped by, quiet conversation coming in waves. October sunshine danced on my skin.

“I forgot to tell you about your dad,” I said, grinning at the memory. Jimmy hummed in my ear. I went on, “When I saw my mom in San Fran last week, I met him at the gym. He was trying new equipment, and it was beyond hilarious.” The image of him standing in front of the chest press (*not* seated, as was normal), while trying to squeeze the pads together with his hands was classic.

“Put it up on YouTube next time.”

God, that would be mean...but hysterical. “He’d never trust me again.”

“He doesn’t know what YouTube is, so he’d be clueless. And that man worships you.”

“He grunts at me.”

“That’s high praise from George Giannopoulos. I’d have killed for a grunt in high school.”

A butterfly, yellow and black, flitted past us, nearly touching my knee. It hopped around, flying from place to place, as though it didn’t know where to land. How I used to feel. Untethered. Unsure where to anchor myself. Until Jimmy. I’d forgiven George and Alena their deception, earning another father from the deal, though he was challenging at times. More roots grounding me.

But my favorite root snaked his arms tighter around me. “I love you, Ray.”

Those words never ceased to turn me boneless. “I love you more.”

“It’s not a contest.”

“Isn’t everything with us?”

“Okay, Sunshine. You love me more. But my dick wants to enter into the running. He’s got it bad for you.”

The candidate in question poked my back. “Maybe I’ll tie *you* up this weekend. Ravish your body. Use a blindfold.”

“Such a tease.”

“*The Tease of Monte Cristo*,” I said, instigating my name game.

His body shook with a light laugh. “*Raging Tease*.”

“*The Lord of the Tease*.”

“*Raiders of the Lost Tease*.”

“That one sounds like a porno,” I said. “Actually, they all do. Which gives me another idea for our weekend...”

He nipped my shoulder, my body cocooned in his. We both sighed.

Eventually, he shifted backward and flipped me around, facing him. “My parents want to meet your mother, asked what weekend was good.”

Wow. A daunting prospect, but not surprising. We’d been living together three months, which made the progression natural. Still, the monumental event felt big, and sad. Every milestone in my brother and my lives would be celebrated without our father. Dad wouldn’t witness the birth of his first grandchild, wouldn’t be there for my graduation day. He wouldn’t meet Jimmy or his parents. Not in the flesh, at least.

He was watching us, somehow. Of that I was sure. “If it’s at my mother’s place, she’ll serve her onion dip and Stanley will accost your father.”

Jimmy chuckled. “Then it has to be there. But don’t warn my folks about the dip. Watching them choke it down will be priceless.”

“You’re awful, but thank you.”

“For what?”

“For showing up in that bar and asking to buy me a drink.”

“Thanks for screaming pussy. Which is something you should do more often. Actually, we haven’t been out drinking in a while. Might be time to get you liquored up. I’ll pop some popcorn and watch you embarrass yourself.”

“You really are the sweetest boyfriend.”

He smiled at my sarcasm, and I kissed his nose.

“I wasn’t going for sweet, Sunshine. I’m the wild one, remember?” He lay down and pulled me with him, pressing my head to his chest.

*Th-thump, th-thump* went his heart. Mine trotted in time.

Our parents meeting might mean a ring was on its way. Scary and exciting—my life moving forward at a steady pace. A life I barely recognized. We were living in Napa Valley, and I was finally following my dreams. I returned to the city often to see Cora and her growing belly, my brother waiting on her hand and foot. Even my mother had an admirer.

And my life in the valley was a breath of fresh air. Jimmy had taken his rightful place at his family’s winery, working alongside his brother, while still following *his* dreams and spearheading a new Napa festival. He woke up driven, ready for each day, taking pride in his accomplishments.

I couldn’t have asked for anything more.

I wasn’t sure where Gwen and Ainsley were with their birthday wishes. They knew Vesper had closed down. Unlike me, they weren’t under the misguided impression that magic had touched our resolutions. But I was thankful for the silly assumption. Without that push, my life wouldn’t be opening like a fine wine, depth and character building. All it had taken

was a little courage, belief in the impossible, and one very bad boy.

## BONUS CHAPTER



“The Blackout Night of Hot Sex and Bad Decisions” from the start of the novel revealed below!

JIMMY

I’d never enjoyed walking through my building’s hallway quite this much. My dirty princess was in front of me, swaying her hips like a sexy siren. There was no stiffness in her gait. No fidgeting or slowing of her pace. Our wine and verbal jousting had certainly loosened her up, and the way her top dipped low in the back? Fucking delicious.

She swiveled and propped her hand next to apartment number five. “Shall we go in and get to the *stand* part of this one-night stand?”

“You want to have sex against the wall?”

“What? No. It’s just a saying. One-night *stand*. Wall sex is too much work. I don’t do walls. Or one-night stands, which really is a ridiculous saying. They should be called one-night fucks.” Her freckled cheeks flamed red. “Did I just say that out loud?”

Damn, flustering her was fun. I crowded her until my belt buckle rubbed her belly. “Even though you don’t do one-night fucks, you’re awfully eager to get into my pants.”

“We have a deal,” she said, breathing faster. “I don’t welch on my deals.”

“Neither do I, but...” I eyed the apartment door.

She followed my line of sight and froze. “Oh my God. Are you married? Or in a relationship. Because I don’t do cheating. Or threesomes. Or—”

“One-night fucks or walls. Yeah, Sunshine. I know all the things you don’t do. But I also know you want to *do* me. And I swear there are no wives or girlfriends to worry about.”

She eyed the still-closed door. “Are you having second thoughts?”

The disappointment in her downturned lips had my ego preening. “My only thoughts involve my cock and your sweet pussy, but if I take you in there, Mr. Puglisi might have a heart attack. That’s his place.”

She snorted out a laugh but didn’t look away from me. “Your mouth should be illegal.”

“So should your top.” I reached behind her and trailed a finger down her exposed spine, loving the feel of her velvet skin, the shiver coursing through her. “My place is the next door down on your left.”

Her eyelids were heavy from drinking, but there was no missing the darkening desire in her hungry gaze. She leaned forward, like she wanted to kiss me. I leaned in too, ready for my first taste of this fascinating woman, but she spun away. She stumbled a step, then caught herself and sauntered to my door.

I stalked after her, feeling impatient. Keyed up. The wine had me buzzing, but there was something about this woman. Watching her test her boundaries with me was addictive. She was cute, funny. Unapologetic about her hang-ups. Refreshing in a sea of predictable women.

Too impatient to deal with my key and a lock, I clasped her hip. She stumbled again. I caught her deftly and pulled her back against my chest.

“You,” I murmured with a light lick to her ear, “are the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. How about giving me those pretty lips.” She trembled but didn’t turn her head. “You prefer a little taste beforehand? A tease of how good it’ll feel to kiss me?”

She arched her back and nodded.

*As my princess wishes.*

Blowing a stream of hot breath against her ear, I pushed her front into my door, not caring that we were in my public hallway. That someone might catch me dismantling this gorgeous woman. My only thoughts were *her, here, now*.

I swept aside her soft hair, revealing the long line of her neck. I kissed the shell of her ear, gave her another dirty lick and pressed my thickened cock into her ass. She released a needy moan, no doubt feeling what she was doing to me. Just a kiss and a lick, and I was achingly hard. I moved to her jaw and neck, brushed my nose and scruffy cheek against her, following with wet kisses, moving my body while I moved my mouth. Showing her how good she was about to get fucked. And *damn*, she was responsive, pushing her ass into me and tipping her head back, giving me more access.

“This,” I said, sliding a hand down to cup her pussy over her jeans. “This is mine tonight. You good with that?”

“Yes. God, *yes*. But no walls.”

I chuckled and nipped her neck. “No walls, Sunshine. But I might not make it to my bed.”

Keeping her trapped against my chest, I fished my keys from my pocket. Once the door was opened, I walked her through, lavishing her ear and neck with more attention. She dropped her purse on the floor. I cupped her again, rubbing her mound with the heel of my hand.

She moaned a whispered, “Fuck,” then pulled out of my grasp. “Wow. You’re really good with that mouth.” She patted her hair, looking bewildered. “Are you sure you’re not a serial killer?”

I dragged a hand down my face, then adjusted my painful hard-on while trying to follow her shift in subject. “Are most serial killers good with their mouths?”

She gestured at my apartment. “It’s so *stark* in here. So *sad*. Like someone doesn’t want to leave any trace of themselves. Serial killer,” she added, shooting me a cheeky look. “I should check things out. You know, before the one-night fucking.” A nervous laugh burred out of her, and I crossed my arms, enjoying the show.

Part of the show, at least.

She wasn’t wrong about my pad being stark. I ate meals on my couch, so never bothered buying a dining table. My other furniture was basic, the white walls bare. There was no way in hell any pictures of my backstabbing family would have graced this place. Yeah, it was stark and sad. All but the nosy little princess going through my kitchen cupboards, looking for God knew what.

“Holy shit.” She had my wine cupboard open and was gawking so wide her jaw looked unhinged. “Holy fucking shit.”

“Please tell me I didn’t forget any body parts in there.”

She yanked a bottle from the cupboard and gestured at me with it. “This is a Screaming Eagle. You have a Screaming Eagle. *Here*. In this sad, sad apartment. Oh my God.” She pressed the bottle to her chest, practically motorboating the thing.

I laughed at her antics, unsure how this beauty who knew wine wound up in my place. Her silliness was as enjoyable as the anticipation of what was to come. “I used to collect wine.”

“This isn’t collecting wine. *I* collect wine. This is wine royalty, and it’s just sitting here, in a crappy laminate cupboard, when it should be encased in glass. Or gold. Or crystal.”

“You’re right. It shouldn’t be there.”

When I kicked my old life to the curb, I ditched my wine collection, except for a handful of special bottles. I hadn’t

looked at them in ages. Until this mystery woman livened up my night.

“We should open it,” I said.

Horror cloaked her face. “Excuse me?”

“We should open it. Drink it. *Enjoy* it.” I suddenly craved to see her enraptured expression when taking her first sip.

She held the bottle tighter to her chest. “We can’t. Not here, like this. We’re not celebrating, and this is a celebration wine.”

I stalked into my kitchen, pulled a corkscrew from the drawer, and cornered her against the counter. “We can and we will. We’re celebrating your first one-night fuck.”

She squeaked. I snatched the bottle from her, moved around my small kitchen, until I had the wine open and two glasses poured. I lifted my glass and waited for her to follow suit.

Reverently, she picked hers up and inhaled its aroma. “Holy fucking shit.”

“For a preppy girl, you swear a lot.”

“That’s not me. That’s the wines.” Face bright and blushing, she clinked her glass with mine. “To my first one-night.. *fuck*.” She whispered the last word like she was suddenly prim.

We sniffed and sipped, and I didn’t take my eyes off her: the softening of her delicate shoulders, the bliss in her parting lips as her head tipped back. Her little hum of pleasure had my dick waking back up.

“I can die happy now,” she breathed.

“Not me.” The wine was sublime. It hit hard with blackcurrant, graphite, and tobacco notes, plus had killer structure, but I needed something else on my tongue. I placed my glass down and cupped her cheeks. “I’d like to kiss you now, my fascinating woman whose name I’ll never know.”

For a second, she seemed to look at me with adoration, like we were a couple. Like I meant something to her. Fuck knew why my chest got warm. Why I wanted to add loopholes to our rules. Another night. A two-night fuck. But she put her glass down and tilted up her chin.

That was all the invitation I needed.

I slanted my mouth over hers and *sipped* her. Tasted her lips, moving slow, coaxing her open. She moaned, giving me what I wanted: her tongue, her softness, that gorgeous wine mingling with her heady taste. It wasn't enough. I got my hands under her top, lifted it up, while she got busy with my button-down, yanking it up and over my messy hair.

“Jesus,” I ground out. She wasn't wearing a bra under that sexy tank, and I was not prepared for the glory of her tits. “You're a fucking vision.”

“I didn't know I was into tattoos, but I think I'm into tattoos.” She traced the ink on my chest, heating my blood. “I also need more of this wine.”

We both drank some more, not talking, just eyeing each other's bare chests as we appreciated the fantastic wine. I ran a hand over my stiff cock, loving the view, needing more than wine on my tongue. I crowded her, leaned down, and pulled one glorious breast into my mouth. I circled her nipple with my tongue, coaxed it into a stiff peak as she yanked at my hair with throaty moans. My body was on fire, desperate to sink into her tight heat, but not yet. I wanted more. All of this stranger who didn't feel so strange on this wild night.

I undid the button on her jeans, helped her get naked, my mouth watering at the sight of the tight curls covering her glistening pussy.

“Naked,” she said, reaching for my belt. “You're not naked enough.”

“Soon.” I stilled her hand. “I need you on this counter first.”

“You...*what?*” Her face was flushed from tonight's wine, her brown eyes flitting nervously between me and my kitchen

counter.

I pulled her naked body against me, reveled in her soft breasts pressing to the hard planes of my chest. *So fucking good.* But yeah, there was something else I craved before my jeans hit the floor. “You’re my buffet, Sunshine. Buffets go on counters, so that’s where your sexy ass is going.”

Not waiting for her reply, I grabbed her hips and hoisted her onto the counter. She gasped but didn’t hop off.

I guided her to lie back. “You gonna be a good girl for me and let me feast on you?”

“I don’t—”

“Nope,” I said, grabbing my wine glass. “We’re done with your list of don’ts. If you want me to stop because you’re uncomfortable, say the word. But if this is you being scared of trying something new, as seems to be your pattern from what I can tell, the answer is: I don’t care.”

“So darn bossy.” She stared at me for a beat, heated eyes narrowed, then she lay out for me, but she twined her fingers over her belly, clearly uncomfortable.

Something I could quickly cure.

Standing over her—a vision of tanned, freckled skin—I picked up my wine glass and dribbled some between her breasts.

“Oh my God. You’re wastin—”

“Shhh,” I murmured, dipping down to lick up the wine. I followed the path, kissing and sucking her skin, high on her trust and the Screaming Eagle, and the way she arched her back, no longer fighting me. More wine on her tits and belly. More roving kisses. When I poured a splash on her pussy, she cried out and squeezed her eyes shut. I hadn’t even touched her there yet, but she was shifting her body and biting her lip.

Loving her intense reaction, I moved to the end of the counter, grabbed her hips, and yanked her forward. “You ready to spread those long legs for me.”

“I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“We’re sure as fuck doing this.”

Bending down, I hooked my hands under her knees and bent her legs up, exposing her. Instead of diving in for what I wanted, I licked and nipped her inner thighs, bit her ass, getting oh so close to her slit, then coasting away until she was panting and canting her hips, desperate for me.

“I’ve never...” She rocked her head back and forth on the counter, her eyes squeezed tight. “*This* has never felt like this.”

I growled at her admission, everything in me flexing as I finally spread her wide and licked a path up her center. She cried out. My dick swelled. Impatient for her to fall apart on my tongue, I flicked her clit, mercilessly working her over. She was trembling in seconds, her hips nearing liftoff. She pressed against my face. No shame. No holding back. This prim princess pushed into me, asking for more, and I devoured her, giving my all until she gripped my hair, a scream ripping from her throat.

I nosed her thighs after, slowly lowered her legs. “I’d say the wine’s celebration worthy now, wouldn’t you?”

She looked blissed out, naked and boneless on my counter. “Your tongue is magic. So is your face and that hair and the scruffy jaw, and did I tell you I think I’m into tattoos?”

I chuckled at her cuteness and started undoing my belt. “You mentioned something about ink.”

I dropped my jeans and briefs, freeing my aching cock.

She took one look at my rock-hard dick and gasped. “You have metal through your penis.”

“That I do.”

Eyes wide, she slipped off the counter, lowered to her knees, and wrapped her slender hand around my shaft. I bucked, had never felt my dick this heavy. I forced my eyes open, looked down at her innocent face filled with heat and wonder as she stared at the piercing through the head of my cock. Possessiveness blasted through me. The strangest urge to call this woman *mine*.

“Can I lick it? It looks like it hurts. Does it hurt? Why would any man *do* this?”

“In answer to your questions, you can do whatever you want to my dick. It hurts in the best way, and because this man likes to experiment.”

“Dangerous,” she murmured, eyes on my piercing.

She flicked it with her tongue. I groaned, heat searing my thighs. Slow and curious, she explored the metal, tugging just enough to have my legs flexing and balls tightening. When she took me deep, swallowing my shaft on a moan, I cursed and pulled out of her.

“Time to get fucked, Sunshine.” I hauled her up, pressing our bodies tight, my flushed erection trapped between us, giving me a moment to calm down. I didn’t know what it was about this woman, why I was so turned on. So on the edge. All I knew was I needed to sink into her before I lost my mind.

Kissing frantically, we made it out of the kitchen, but we didn’t make it far. I hauled her down to the carpet, under me, the two of us groping wildly as we panted and slid against each other, my dick getting so close to slipping into her. Too damn close.

Breaking away from her, I got up, found my jeans, then tossed a condom on the floor next to her. “Wanna do the honors?”

She snatched the packet greedily, had the condom out by the time I knelt in front of her, and *fuck*, feeling her roll it down my shaft, watching the unguarded desire branding her face...yeah. I wasn’t going to last long.

She lay back, legs spread, those gorgeous tits mine to explore. I leaned down, lining the head of my cock up with her opening, and took one pert nipple into my mouth. “This feel good, Sunshine?”

“So good. All the good. The most good.”

I chuckled against her. “You’re adorable.”

“Not adorable. Sexy.”

“That too,” I said, unsure if I’d ever had this much fun hooking up.

I pushed in an inch, got lost in her tight heat. She arched up and notched her knees into my sides, giving me more access, moaning as I filled her up. My scalp tingled. My balls sparked with intent. My shaft was so engorged and hot I had no choice but slam us flush.

“Oh, God.” She bit my shoulder and clenched around me.

I swore a blue streak, dizzy from this much desire. We stayed like that, clutching each other as I pulled my hips back and thrust into her, sliding against her tight inner walls. Wet sounds of us moving together rang out. My heart beat hard and heavy, a tune that demanded more. More wildness. More wine discussions and laughter.

Everything about this stranger was *more*.

She was close to coming, the walls of her pussy tightening around me, shredding my composure. Heat gripped the base of my spine, spreading outward. My movements got jerkier. I pushed deeper and didn’t pull back, just thrust and grinded down on her, aiming for her sweet spot. She gasped, grabbed my ass, her fingernails deliciously sharp, no doubt leaving marks. Then she was breaking apart, crying out as she came, milking me until I came so fucking hard my vision blurred.

“Hall of Fame Fuck,” she murmured, softening under me.

I chuckled and slid out of her, unsure how I could go so quickly from on fire to laughing. I pulled off the condom, then lay beside her, both of us staring up at the plaster ceiling. “If I’m a Hall of Fame Fuck does that mean fucking is my job?”

“I hate my job,” she said, not answering my question. “It’s the worst.”

“Then you should quit.”

“Right, yeah. Just like that. Quit a perfectly good job with perfectly good money because jobs grow on trees?”

“Because life’s too short to spend it dreading your days.”

She rolled her head my way and peered intently at me. “Are you one of those guru life coach people who make money off of other people’s misery?”

“I have enough misery of my own, thanks.” Shit I didn’t want to think about tonight.

“My boss is a chauvinistic ass. Like, the king of asses. Loves staring at my boobs.”

Irrational anger fired in my gut, as though I wanted to protect this nameless woman. Tear into her office and punch her asshole boss in the neck. “Men like that should have to clean sewers for a living.”

“God, I hate him. And that place. Every time I go in there, my soul dies a little.”

“I already gave you my thoughts on—”

“Maybe I *should* quit,” she murmured. Like she was talking to herself, no longer listening to me. “Because fuck him, right? Why should I deal with him when I’m the one with the power? I can waltz out of there if I want. There’s no law saying I need to work a crappy job.” She sat up and looked down at me, fire sparking in her dark eyes. “Life is too short. You said that.” She poked my arm, then gestured at her chest. “I could get hit by a truck tomorrow.”

I grinned up at her, thoroughly amused by her indignant tirade and loving the view of her gorgeous breasts. “A piano could fall on you from a window.”

“Exactly. I could bite it eating sushi. Choke on a mouthful of rice and salmon.”

“You could slip on a banana peel and smack your head. Boom...*dead*.”

“Oh my God. I need to quit.” She moved to her hands and knees and started crawling toward her discarded purse.

A primitive growl rumbled in my chest. Her ass was spectacular. Firm and rounded, begging for a bite. My spent dick twitched back to life. Before I could grab her and haul her to me, she turned and tossed me her phone.

“We’re doing this,” she said.

“Doing what?”

“I have to ace this quitting. Go out with style. And you.” She pointed at me. “You need to do something wild too.”

“Why do *I* have to do something wild? I’m the one with the ink and piercings and have done one-night fucks before.”

“Because I can’t be the only batshit person tonight. I dare you to open your window and flash the late-night perverts. If you don’t, I’m not quitting.”

“So that’s how we’re rolling? No names. No strings. Never seeing each other again, but I have to flash unsuspecting people so you can quit the job you hate?”

“Yep, yep, and *yep*.” She crawled toward me and yanked at my arm. “Let’s hop to it.”

God, she was funny. Maybe it was because she was drunk. Maybe this was just *her*, but I found myself laughing and getting up and sauntering to my apartment window. The second I yanked it up, she shouted, “Free show!”

I cracked up again. Stood, buck naked, arms crossed, unsure if anyone was on the street this late.

“Hot stuff!” someone hollered from below.

My mystery date and I locked eyes, then we lost it, laughing until we were doubled over. And the sound this woman made? A bark of a cackle, hilarious and adorable.

“Goddamn.” I wiped the corners of my eyes, walking in circles to catch my breath. I haven’t laughed this hard in...hell. I had no clue the last time I laughed this hard. “Your turn,” I told her as I pick up her phone. “How can I help you tell the asshole to fuck off?”

“My butt,” she said.

“Your butt?”

“My butt.”

“I don’t follow.” But I could look at her ass all day. Wouldn’t mind licking up her crack, testing if that tight hole turned her on. And there went my dick again, standing at attention, ready for round two.

Shaking her hair out and catching her breath from laughing, she got on her knees and bent forward. *Hell*. Licking that ass wouldn’t be enough. “Sunshine, you’re killing me.”

“You need to take a shot of my ass, but nothing else,” she said, turning to face me. “Just my butt crack. I have a caption planned.”

Honestly, this woman was a hoot. “You sure about this?”

“What happened to Mr. Life is Too Short?”

“Okay,” I conceded, laughing again. If she needed me to be her wingman, I wasn’t about to backtrack. “Let’s shoot your gorgeous ass.”

Not only did she resume her position, but she moved her hands on either side of her butt crack, so she was swearing at me. I snapped the shot, grinning so hard my cheeks hurt.

“My job’s done.” I tossed her the phone.

Expression intent, she got busy tapping out a message, and I got busy crawling over to her and kissing her calves, licking and nipping all that smooth skin. She sighed. Her phone hit the floor. I had no clue if she sent that message or not. I was too far gone, so amused and tipsy and *hard*.

Not wanting a repeat of the floor, I grabbed her waist and hoisted her up with me, walking her into the wall.

“I don’t do walls,” she said, her voice husky, as I devoured her neck and breasts.

“This is our one night, and I want you against this wall, clinging to me as I fuck up into your tight cunt. You gonna deny me that after I flashed a street for you?”

She whimpered and wrapped her leg around my waist. “Fine, but only because I’ll never see you again. I probably won’t come.”

Oh, she was going to come. She was going to scream her pleasure, and I would detonate inside her. Then I wouldn't think about her again. I wouldn't relive how fucking fun and hot this night was.

One night.

No names.

No strings.

Exactly how I liked it, but for some reason my chest twinged.

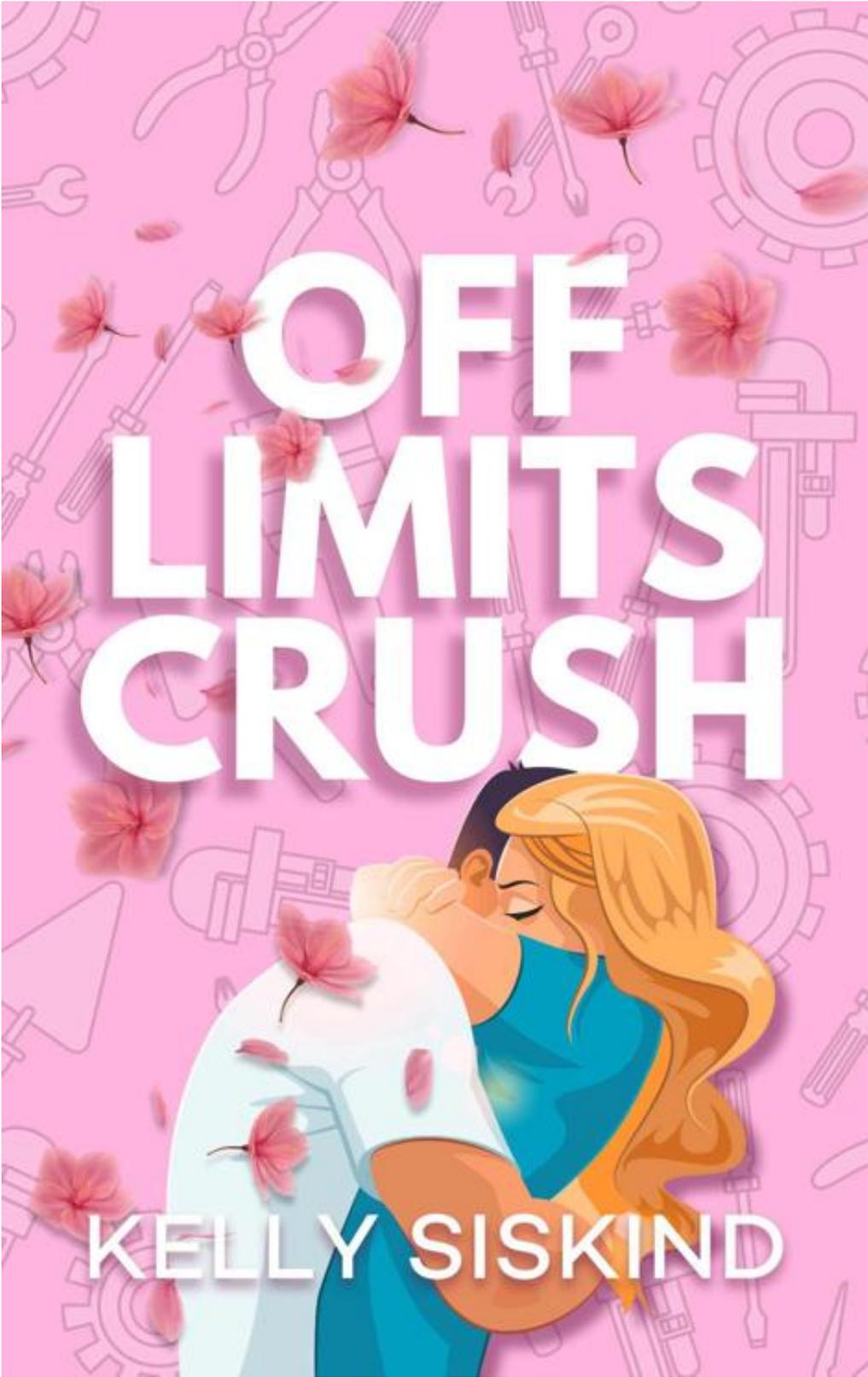


**The fun isn't  
over yet...**

**Wait until you see how  
Ainsley makes a perfect  
fool of herself while she  
unwittingly thinks her  
studly crush is gay.**

**Turn the page and start  
reading book two,  
OFF LIMITS CRUSH!**





# OFF LIMITS CRUSH

KELLY SISKIND

# CHAPTER ONE

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AINSLEY

*A four-letter word meaning a horny covering.*

I went to type *Bull* into my crossword app, but that didn't make sense, horns notwithstanding. Neither did *Knob* or *Flap* or *Fang*.

*Beak*

*Peak*

*Deck*

*Wing*

No. No. No. No.

Frustrated, I tapped my toe while decadent wafts of melted chocolate curled around me. Another minute and I'd be a floating Minnie Mouse, my nose led by the decadent scents. If heaven had a chocolate shop, it would be Aazam's Sweet Treats. Towering truffles, smooth peanut butter cups, and mouth-watering bark lined the shelves, nut clusters drenched in chocolate teasing me. Aazam was a genius with the cocoa bean, *and* all his products were vegan.

A man after my own heart.

The virtuoso held up a finger to tell me my order would be out shortly. I allowed myself a deep sigh. He really was gorgeous. As delicious looking as every morsel in the place. Dark hair and skin, a beard that was sure to tickle, not scratch.

Eyes so soulful they practically sang the blues. His lips should be downright illegal, plump and smooth as they were. They had me thinking up other four-letter words for horny things.

*Kiss*

*Suck*

*Hump*

*Lick*

I nearly wrote *Muff* into my phone, but erased each letter. My G-rated crossword app might explode. I'd become addicted to the word game recently, a way to pass the time while waiting for the doors to open at a Tiffany's sale or a secret pop-up store. As I was about to admit defeat on the horny covering—*Bark? Bibb? Clip?*—Aazam assaulted me with his killer smile.

*Wow.* Heart, meet belly.

He lifted a brown box tied with bright green ribbons. "Ready for you."

Not only was he ready for me (God, how I wished), but he slid over a piece of my favorite seventy-percent chocolate with candied violet. High from his smile and the rich smells, I took a bite before thanking him. Double wow.

When I stopped moaning and opened my eyes, I said, "Are you sure you're gay?"

If I didn't know better, I'd say my chocolatier was blushing under his dark scruff. "Last I checked."

"Like, really sure?"

"Yep."

"Not even bi? I promise I'm great in bed."

That had him chuckling. I added a bottle of his chocolate-spiked perfume to my order. A couple dabs on my neck always put the sexy in my step.

He ran my credit card, then locked his John Lee Hooker eyes on me. "If I were straight, I'd be all over your offer.

Especially with that outfit of yours. Make sure you flaunt it today. Any heterosexual male in a thirty-mile radius will trip over himself to get your number.”

My gingham wrap dress *did* give me cleavage for days, but the only two men who’d dialed up my lust-o-meter recently had proven poor choices. Emmett, the Adonis at the gym—*gay*. My heavenly chocolatier, Aazam—sadly, *gay*. Gwen and Rachel had pegged Emmett’s sexuality right away, my best friends razzing me endlessly. My denial lingered until I’d witnessed him locking lips with a man. Aazam had blatantly turned down my dinner-date offer. He’d sent me home with chocolate, a hug, and a mildly bruised ego.

My gaydar was clearly broken, the instrument fogged up by raging hormones.

I needed to find release.

Finishing off my piece of *almost-better-than-sex* chocolate, I turned with a wave, but swiveled back. “What’s a four-letter word for a horny covering?”

Aazam scratched his bearded cheek, then clapped. “Nail!”

“Nail? Like”—I fluttered my manicured hand—“*nail*, nail?”

“I think so.”

I’d never been a language geek, unless *Prada* and *Gucci* were involved. But my new hobby had fired up my synapses, transforming me into a well-dressed linguist, who often cheated to finish puzzles. Aazam, however, was a total word savant. I’d once asked him for a five-letter word for a coastal feature, and he’d said, “Bight,” in two seconds flat.

Apparently a horny covering didn’t involve licking muffs (dammit). Horny coverings were *nails*.

“You’re a genius,” I called as I hurried out the door.

I hit the road, two unpleasant errands left to round out my day. I tapped my horny coverings against my steering wheel, the edges of my nails clipped and buffed to perfection. Ms. Mae’s hand massage this morning had rendered my skin soft

as silk, my mind nearly comatose. And her polish job? My tiger-striped French tips, with their flamingo-pink highlights, deserved to be hung in the Museum of Modern Art.

Picasso had nothing on my nails.

He also had nothing on the azure blue Versace draped over my back seat. I'd strip my nails bare for a night in that dress. It was perfection personified, and the slit up the front would highlight Mrs. Arlington's legs—her greatest asset. She would be thrilled, which meant her husband would be thrilled, which meant I'd deserve the hefty bonus coming my way.

I should be sale-at-Sephora giddy.

Except for the box of chocolates hijacking my passenger seat. Another gift purchased on my client's behalf, Mr. Infidelity himself, Thomas Arlington the *third*.

His most recent mistress had a soft spot for sweets. In particular, Aazam's eighty-percent dark chocolate bars sprinkled with cayenne pepper and pistachios. I noticed the packaging in her trash the first day we met, along with a broken pocket mirror. A replacement mirror, with similar gold detailing, had arrived on her doorstep that week, the chocolates following regularly, all punctuated with love notes from her doting philanderer.

Clamping my jaw, I drove faster and turned up the music. Nothing like a little Pat Benatar to lift my mood. Love was a battlefield, all right. A battle I had no interest in joining. Not when it was littered with duped women and lying husbands. Count me in for the pillaging afterward, though. If it came with a straight Aazam, or hunky men in kilts whose Scottish accents could slip into my Victoria Secret Cheekinis, then giddy-up.

Unfortunately, these days, all my *oh-my-God-yes-yes-yeses* applied to stellar purchases, not savage plundering.

I parked near the Arlingtons' house. Thomas's Porsche wasn't on the street. He could be working or golfing, or invading enemy fields...

I pulled the Versace from the car, cradling the plastic-wrapped fabric like a Fabergé egg.

A doorbell ring later, Sloane swung the door wide. “Just the lady I wanted to see.”

She ushered me past a pair of dirty work boots, the clanging from above hinting at construction work. Remodeling their bathroom, if I remembered correctly. She disappeared into their modern townhome, and I laid her dress over their leather couch. I checked and rechecked my watch, urging the second hand to tick faster.

Spending time with Sloane was always uncomfortable. She’d chat about her morning playing tennis, and I’d smile and answer while thinking, *your husband is a lying sack of shit*. A sack of shit who helped pay my bills, which allowed me to wire cash to my parents.

My golden handcuffs were cemented in place.

Sloane returned with an envelope and presented it to me. “Thank you.”

I took it by the edge and looked up at her. Even in my pink Manolo Blahniks, I was a head shorter than the statuesque brunette. “Thank you for what?”

“For that dress, for one. Your eye for clothing is remarkable.” She ran her fingers over the clear plastic. “And for always going out of your way for me. I know you work for Thomas, but your help with the shoe emergency was above and beyond. Plus, you’ve become a friend. So, thank you.”

Running over a pair of heels because hers had snapped in the middle of a fundraiser wasn’t part of my job description, but the friend part of her comment had me wanting to slither out of the room. Friends told friends when bad things were happening. Friends saved friends from future heartache. Having been on the receiving end of a cheating manwhore once, I didn’t wish it on anyone.

Without opening the envelope, I pushed it back at her. “Thank you, but I can’t. I’m happy to help.”

*Please, get me out of here.*

A loud bang blasted from above us, and we both winced. “Bathroom reno is turning into a bit of a nightmare. And”—she raised a sculpted eyebrow at the envelope I was attempting to refuse—“I’m not taking that back. It’s a gift.” She picked up her dress and hugged it to her skinny frame, a body she kept painfully thin (green-vegetable diet), likely for her scumbag husband. “It’s spectacular, Ainsley. Thomas will love it.”

That part I didn’t doubt. Give me ten minutes in someone’s home, and I could list their favorite beverage and coffee addiction, where they purchased their linens, judge their waist, hip, and bust measurements (Sloane was a size celery), and the jewelry they coveted all with a nod and a walkthrough. Which is why Thomas had passed my cards to his friends, and why I mainly shopped for overpaid lawyers who “worked late” and had unscheduled “business meetings.”

I was to personal shopping what Walter White was to methamphetamine. I was *great* at my job. I loved scouring stores for that *oh-my-God-yes-yes-yes* item. I also contributed to the downfall of society and needed cash. (Instead of *Breaking Bad*, my HBO series would be called *Killing Love*.)

Insert heavy sigh here.

“The dress will look stunning on you,” I said. “Have a fun night, and you shouldn’t have gotten me anything, but thank you.” I saluted her with the envelope, like an awkward army recruit, and hurried toward the door, speed walking so quickly I nearly slipped on a nail. *Not* a horny covering. I picked up the offending piece of metal and hightailed it to my car as fast as my heels would allow.

Now I had to gift chocolate to the mistress.

Once that joyful deed was done, I sat in my Mini Cooper and opened Sloane’s envelope. Two tickets to the San Francisco Ballet’s *Cinderella*. Not only was she sweet enough to buy me a gift, she also ran a small bookkeeping business. She could walk a red carpet with enough confidence to draw paparazzi...and her husband was cheating on her.

I slumped into my seat, unsure how much longer I could keep this up. I loved aspects of my job—piecing together clues

to discern the perfect gift or outfit, helping someone look his or her finest—the rest of it was a giant pile of suck that paid well.

I picked up the metal nail from my passenger seat and flipped it through my fingers. If I had to write a crossword clue for this sucker, it would be:

*Four-letter word for a pointed spike I'd like to jam into my eye.*

I couldn't quit my job just yet, but I could do something to lessen this sticky feeling. Like I'd been sprayed by a rogue perfume sampler. Needing assistance, I picked up my phone and dialed Rachel.

Three rings later, she answered. "I just had an orgasm."

"Manual or with a certain tattooed hunk?"

"Tongue climax *without* the hunk. This Chardonnay is sinful."

Aazam's chocolate did the same for me. "I could use a drink about now. Probably a box of wine."

She coughed through the line. "Don't even joke about that. And why do you need this *box* of wine you will not be drinking?" I could practically see her give a heebie-jeebie shake. Total wine snob.

I traced distracted circles on my steering wheel. "Is your life perfect?"

She snorted. "No one's life is perfect."

I waved an impatient hand, as though she could see me. "I'm talking generalities. The big stuff."

"I don't know. I mean, I love living in Napa. Viticulture school is tough but rewarding. I'm an aunt to the cutest girl birthed this millennium, and, well...*Jimmy*." She sighed on his name, no explanation needed.

Those two couldn't look at each other without every person in the room swooning or puking. What they had was intense. It was sweet and heart-melting and slightly sickening

to witness. It also wasn't why I'd called her. "You fulfilled your birthday wish, didn't you?"

Silence answered me. Then, "I felt weird talking to you guys about it, not knowing if you'd worked on yours, but...I did. Why? What's up?"

"I just see everything in your life falling into place, and I wondered if that was part of the reason."

She didn't answer right away, and my mind tripped back to that night, as it often did. The night of our shared twenty-seventh birthday. Being born on April 12<sup>th</sup> had been as lucky as happening upon my first *Vogue* magazine. My two best friends had also come into the world on April 12<sup>th</sup>. Even luckier was finding the three of us coincidentally wasted and celebrating the start of our twenty-first year in the same bar.

We'd spent every birthday together since, but it was *last* April 12<sup>th</sup> that had plagued my mind the past six months: the wish each of us had made that night. No. Not a wish. *A life-changing resolution*. The type of change that would shake things up and trigger a domino effect of awesome. We'd linked our pinkies that night and had promised to fulfill our resolutions by our next birthday.

But I hadn't done a thing to realize mine.

Rachel broke her silence. "I believe fulfilling my wish played a part. Being a tad superstitious, I still don't want to hear yours before it's done, but mine was to find a rewarding career, which I'm working toward. So it's like carrying out that one big change affected everything else."

Exactly what I'd hoped for, yet I'd stalled. To fulfill my resolution, I had to become a better person, which meant making amends for my glorified-pimping job. "If you're right, I need to get my ass in gear. I only have six months left."

"Miracles happen all the time."

"True. There *was* that time my brother got laid."

She snickered. "No way. That chick took pity on him. It was for sure your housewarming gift."

“I’m an excellent sister.” Who’d framed a condom with the tagline: In case of emergency break glass.

“You can do this, Ainsley.” Rachel’s soothing tone slid over my tense shoulders. “Regardless what you wished for, I know you’ve been down about work. A friend of Jimmy’s volunteered at Habitat for Humanity. Not sure if he’s still there, but he liked it. Doing something focused on helping others might make you feel better. Whatever you decide, I believe in you.”

That made one of us. “I’ll consider it.”

“That’s the spirit. Oh—and Jimmy went to the city last night to meet some restaurant people. I’m joining him tomorrow. I have to see my family and spoil my niece, but we’ll squeeze in some girl time.”

“Roger that.”

I hit End and stared at my dashboard. The fact that Rachel sensed my wish without me breathing a word of it was a testament to our friendship. I was also a step ahead of her. I’d made a list of Ainsley-tailored volunteering:

Doing makeovers.

Helping fashion victims.

Saving discarded haute-couture items, one Dior at a time.

Soup kitchens involved touching meat. Animal shelters made me sneeze. Working with the elderly reminded me of my grandparents; I’d probably spend my time bawling on some granny’s flower-print lap.

That left the Habitat build. Rachel had mentioned it once before. I’d been too anxious to sign up, but if Rachel—who’d held enough jobs to employ half the city—could fulfill her resolution and stick with a career, I could wear sneakers and dirty my hands. Plus, working on a Habitat project didn’t require experience, and I’d be helping put a roof over a family’s head.

Something I was already familiar with, but paying *my* parents’ mortgage wasn’t bettering society. It was taking care

of my own. Like the framed condom.

Confidence growing, I turned my ignition and pointed my car away from Nob Hill's Victorian homes and headed for the address I'd driven past too often this month. Each drive-by had involved me slowing down, my heart revving up, then I'd peel past the construction site. It was ridiculous. I was an adult. Doing something new, by myself, shouldn't have reduced me to a stage five stalker. Still, each time I'd contemplate stopping, I'd be transported back to high school and the last time I'd stepped outside my element.

That shit show had involved a Chucky's Chicken paper hat, enough grease to drown a small country, and me praying to the porcelain gods before my shifts. Each yack fest was followed by a thousand screw-ups, then co-workers would lob insults my way, like they were spectators watching me die a glorious Roman Gladiator death, cheering for blood.

But I was done creeping the building site. I wouldn't drive by out of fear again, or put off volunteering by claiming I'd sign up online. No. This time I'd force myself out of the car. I would put the "con" in contractor and fake it until I made it. I would study my dictionary app and learn every construction term there was. I wouldn't make a fool of myself, circa 2006. (The Chucky's Chicken Maggot Incident was responsible for my vegan ways.)

By the time I parked at the curb, it was late afternoon and the Habitat build was winding down. When construction had begun a month or two ago, people were always scurrying about. Today there were only a few volunteers around, most looking ready to leave, but I wouldn't let that stop me.

According to their website, twelve two-bedroom townhomes and eighteen three-bedrooms were being built. Affordable houses for the less fortunate. A serious karmic opportunity. The orange hardhats were a concern—not my greatest color—but wearing one would be my first sacrifice.

I looked down at my cleavage and frowned. Walking up in my Michael Kors dress would have me labeled Pampered Princess next to the T-shirts and ripped jeans worn on site. The

museum-worthy nails and Blahniks wouldn't help, either. They'd assume I dished out thousands on my wardrobe and appearance, when in reality I could sniff out sample sales better than a Chanel-trained bloodhound, a handy superpower when bartering for manicures and haircuts.

If I didn't look volunteer-ready, I would at least sound it. I scrolled through my dictionary app and studied up on construction terms.

Boom. Brace. Framing. Fuse. *Infiltration*.

The latter sounded more special ops than volunteer work.

Hammer. Circular Saw. Drill. Screw. *Nail*.

I laughed at the last one, horny-coverings quite the focus of my day today. English hadn't been my best class in high school, but the language had become a fascination since playing my crossword games. One word could have so many definitions. I even watched spelling bees and loved the part where they'd have to use the word in a sentence.

*My manicured nails deserved a two-page Marie Claire spread.*

*I would hammer nails like a regular Bob the Builder.*

As I gripped my door handle and prepared to earn my Girl Scouts' Good Samaritan badge, I noticed an unfamiliar man on the site, or, more accurately, an apparition in the form of a dirty, sweaty, panty-melting hunk.

If this were a music video, mist would be floating up from the ground, the sun setting, this man wiping his brow as Faith Hill sang about bare feet, country nights, and skinny-dipping in a rambling river. In worn jeans and work boots, he looked part-cowboy and all rugged. His ratty white T-shirt clung to his broad chest, biceps bunching as he lifted wood planks. Cheekbones I'd kill for upped his hot factor. He didn't talk to anyone, just went about his work. The pinched lines of his face hinted at a broody nature, and I liked me some tormented heroes.

My hormones sparked to life, Aazam's recent rejection and my dry-spell fanning the flames. A new definition popped into

my mind, sending a smile skipping across my face.

*I wanted to nail that man.*

## CHAPTER TWO

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Four-letter word meaning the vertical height between stairs.

*Or to become stiff and erect.*

R I S E

OWEN

I should have joined the priesthood. Maybe I'd have been better off with my brother's genes, not that dating men came with any less drama. Still, my soon-to-be ex-wife could win a Tony for her theatrics. The melodrama made her a stellar attorney. It also made for a messy and long divorce.

With a grunt, I hefted a final wood plank to its new pile, readying the site for tomorrow's build. Studs to be put in place, framing to be done. I welcomed the tug on my muscles, the deep ache in my shoulders and forearms. It was honest work. A hell of a lot better than hunching over a desk for hours. Investment bankers didn't make things. They didn't even buy things. For eight years, I brokered sales and deals, not caring who got screwed along the way. Starbucks had been my life's blood, my chair an extension of my ass.

Now I could breathe.

Sawdust. Fresh-cut pine. Freedom drifting on the October breeze.

If my lawyer hadn't dealt me another blow this morning, I might have actually smiled as I inhaled a lungful of air. Instead I huffed out my breath, clamping my molars tight.

With the new delivery of lumber cleared to the side, I wiped my brow and stretched my neck. A cold beer would be heaven right now. A pizza even better. I took a mental inventory of my sparse fridge and added a trip to the store to my route home. Pick up a slice and a case of Pliny the Elder. Kick up my feet on my back patio. Just me, the squirrels, my neighbor's noisy Jack Russell, and a night with Victor Hugo. Forget about Tessa and her fucked-up accusations. The knots in my shoulders loosened a fraction.

"Do you handle the volunteers?"

I spun at the raspy voice, not expecting the blond bombshell in front of me. The *curvy* blond bombshell. Her massive purse and dangerous-looking heels weren't my style, but she oozed old-Hollywood elegance with her shapely hips and soft features.

I pulled off my work gloves and slapped them against my thigh, sending a cloud of dust between us. "No."

But the temptation of handling *her* teased my peripheral vision. That's what happened when you went without for over a year. Not that offering one syllable would get me far with a woman.

The blond twirled a lock of golden hair around her finger. Something about the action pushed up her breasts. I shifted, unsure where to look. I wasn't that guy. I tried to make sure women knew they were more than the sum of their parts. *This* woman's parts each deserved their own sonnet, curvy as she was, but I was out of practice—all awkward silence and no finesse—and she reminded me too much of the women in D.C. Superficial. Self-centered.

The life I'd kicked to the curb.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I forced my attention to her eyes, and my heart switched gears. *Blue*.

*Blue* was all I could see. Blue for a country mile.

Her eyes shone like the sun streaming through turquoise beach glass, pushing long-buried memories to the surface. Startled, I grunted at her, like a Neanderthal, and went to turn.

“So,” she called, and I flipped back. “What’s it like working here? I was thinking of signing up. Doing a couple of shifts each week.”

I chuckled, picturing this pint-sized beauty dirtying her perfect nails. About as likely as my ex working less than an eighty-hour week.

Her luminous eyes narrowed. “For your information, I’ve done construction before. I’m not a total rookie.”

She straightened her posture, daring me to challenge her. The only other person left on site was Nick, making sure all was locked up for the night. He needed to get done and get home, drive his son to karate. I stayed, grudgingly.

“Right.” My tone came out nastier than intended. “You look ready to drywall the place.” Nastier again.

She pursed her bee-stung lips, the plump beauties rich and lush. “Don’t go getting all judgmental. I know the difference between fiberglass sheetrock and cement board.” A smug grin settled on her face, like she was proud of herself. She eyed the backfilled construction site, studied the pipes poking their heads out of the earth. “Are you at the saddle and cripple stage?”

I nearly laughed again, but I reined myself in. I wasn’t a contractor. I’d volunteered on Habitat builds since living in D.C. and paid my rent now with handyman jobs, but woodworking was my thing. I loved dragging my fingers against rough wood, knowing what was once a towering tree could be a rocking chair to calm a baby, a table for a family, a bed to help someone sleep.

What I *did* know about building a house, was people didn’t toss around words like *saddle* and *cripple*.

“We’re saddling,” I said, playing with her. “I assume you have your own tools?”

“Yeah. Sure. Of course.”

The pretty little liar was full of it. “Well, we have tools on site, but not always enough to go around. You’ll need a tape measure and hammer and framing square, and don’t forget the chalk-line clamp. You won’t always have a partner to work with.”

“Right. Chalk-line clamp. No problem.” But the corners of her pink lips turned down.

“Safety glasses are a must.”

The fear of God shone on her face. “I haven’t seen anyone in safety glasses.”

“We haven’t started cutting wood yet. Face shield and respiratory mask, too.” I had no idea why I was messing with her. Maybe because she was primped and polished and reminded me of my ex, a master manipulator who wove tall tales for a living. I doubted this woman deserved to be toyed with, but I’d been raked over the coals for months. My bullshit-meter had reached its limit.

“When you show up,” I said, “no cuffs on pants or unbuttoned shirts. No jewelry at all. Safety comes first. We have hardhats and gloves, and you have to wear sturdy shoes.” I shot a look at her mile-high heels.

Her reply: “You’re kind of bossy.”

Instead of the same evil stare I got when I’d laughed at her expense, her gaze dipped down my body, slow and languid, soaking me in. Something in me twitched to life, like a phantom limb reminding me hot blood once pumped through my veins. *All* my veins. My groin got heavy, heat flushing my thighs. Because she looked at me.

I let that notion marinate and did my best to keep my brain on target. “Just giving you the lay of the land. And if you plan on volunteering tomorrow, or any day, show up at 8:30 a.m. sharp. Nick will take you through the paces.”

“Will you be here?”

“Possibly.”

“Are you here every day?”

“Some.”

“Do you often answer questions with one word?”

“Depends.”

She tipped her head, those beach-glass eyes intent upon me. Suddenly, heading home for beers and pizza didn't sound as appealing. I dug my boots deeper into the earth.

She swiped her tongue across her full bottom lip. “All right, tough guy. I'll be here next week. Where you *may* or *may not* be, depending on if you *do* or *do not* decide to show up. I'll wear ugly clothes and get my gear, and maybe we'll see each other again.”

Every word dripped with flirtatiousness, and I contemplated telling her I was messing around. That she only needed the face shield when working with flying debris. The way I'd all but grunted at her so far, probably better to keep my mouth shut.

So we stood there—her waiting on me to speak, a skateboarder barreling down the road at our left. *Me* unsure why she was affecting me.

I missed being with a woman. Missed the slide of soft skin and wet mouths, and locking my girl in my arms for the night. But I'd sworn I'd do it right this time. Not rush in. Make sure I dated someone with depth and interests outside of making bank. Everything about this spitfire girl read narcissistic.

When our silence slipped into awkward, she fluttered her fingers in my face. “It's been...interesting.”

I offered her a curt nod.

Chuckling to herself, she spun around, but her right heel wedged into the loose dirt. Those damn shoes were lethal. She sank an inch and teetered, but seemed to catch herself. Then her massive purse fell. The thick strap landed on her forearm, tipping the balance. She shot out her hand, struggling to stay upright.

I lunged for her, clasping her trim waist to hold her steady. And close. Too close. Not near enough for her to feel how I

was thickening behind my zipper, but the air swelled. It dilated with feminine scents. Something sweet. *Nice*.

She smelled like chocolate.

My hands spanned her waist from behind, her curves above and below all woman. Hour glass, like a modern-day Marilyn Monroe. Jean Harlow. Mae West. Over the years, I'd watched every classic movie there was, wishing I could slip to a time when men danced and women sang and loyalty and love were valued over getting ahead. An old soul, my nana always said. Or a romantic. Or just plain trouble.

Now I had my hands on a dangerous beauty. I shouldn't have been thinking about gripping her tighter or picturing my lips coasting over her jaw and down her neck. More began rising than my temperature. I noticed her foot then, the delicate sole having slipped out of her shoe, her toenails painted a soft pink.

Gripping my wrists for balance, she slid her shoe back on. "Thanks for the quick save." She turned to face me, but I didn't release her waist. "I'm Ainsley, by the way."

No woman should have a voice that sexy, as husky as a lounge singer in a smoky room.

"I'm Owen." *My* voice was nothing but rocks and gravel. Needing a breather, I stepped back. "Until next time."

"Next time," she replied.

She navigated the uneven ground cautiously, still managing to sway her full hips as she went. I turned and slapped my gloves against my thigh again, anything to busy my hands, distract my mind. Ease the blood flow to my groin. Going home solo was a bad idea. I'd either stew over Tessa's latest antics, or I'd stroke myself to the image of this pinup girl in all her natural glory.

I stopped at my truck and pulled out my phone. Half a ring later, my brother picked up. "Fine. I'll blow you. Get over here."

"Jesus, Emmett. Now I need to lobotomize myself."

His barking laugh bit through the line. “Fuck, man. Sorry. Thought you were Travis.”

“Travis? What happened to Chris?”

“It ran its course.”

Which meant he hit his one-month limit. Normally, I’d make a crack about him chasing a new guy for the shared-clothing benefits, or give him hell for sleeping around, but my patience wore past thin hours ago. I needed to drink beers or go for a run or take a cold shower. “I was thinking of kicking a ball around. You game?”

The sound of a can cracking open answered me. Then, “Sure. Travis plays, too. I can probably hustle up a couple more. Jimmy around?”

I ground my toe into the dirt. “Doubt it, but I’ll check. Three on three would be good.”

“You have no idea,” he said.

Ladies and gentleman, my brother the manwhore.

“Meet you at the field in an hour,” I said. Exactly what I needed. To run the soccer field. Chase out the messiness of the day. Shake the lingering heat left in Ainsley’s wake.

We hung up, and I was greeted by a missed text from Jimmy.

Jimmy: In town for some meetings. Free for a beer?

Another lucky break.

Me: How about kicking it at the park?

Jimmy: Even better.

Reconnecting with Jimmy was one of the bonuses of moving back to San Francisco. As a teen, I’d been a recluse before him and our days playing soccer for the California Regional League. I still wasn’t sure how Nana had paid for my

spot on the team. Whenever I'd ask, she'd wave a dismissive hand, and say, "Not your concern."

Come middle school, mine and Emmett's clothes all came from Goodwill. Our lunches and dinners had been a study in stretching the dime—peanut butter measured, bread thinly sliced. Still, we'd crowd around the TV at night and watch Fred Astaire glide across the screen. Nana and Emmett would swoon, and I'd let my mind spin with the actor's effortless grace, imagining myself the fleet-footed Casanova, sweeping women off their feet. But I was a second-hand kid in second-hand clothes.

Instead of picking up girls, I'd read books and study and dance with Nana to Irving Berlin and Cole Porter. She schooled me in the ways of women.

*You're always wrong.*

*You're always sorry.*

*You always sleep in the wet spot.*

I split my gut laughing when she laid that last one on me. We did that a lot, at least—danced and laughed and forgot how far on the edge we lived. Made me feel fortunate, not shafted. Then came soccer and Jimmy and teammates slapping my back. I'd busted my ass for my scholarship, landed a beautiful wife, a great job, and thought I'd made it big.

Turns out big looks a lot like lonely nights lit by the pallid glow of a computer screen. Empty bottles of Scotch. Fights. Silent treatments.

Man, did I need that run.

Two hours later, my T-shirt was suctioned to my chest. Our group of six had morphed into ten. Some eager teens were working the field when we'd arrived and opted into our pick-up game, dribbling like pint-sized Pelés, fast as fuck. The action put a grin on my face. Especially when Travis executed a decoy run, and I sent a killer pass to Emmett, who smoked their goalkeeper.

The little shits still won, but Emmett gave Travis's ass a victory slap for the goal.

Followed by a cup and squeeze.

He'd often pull that move on me, grabbing my ass when we had an audience. With different fathers, we didn't look related, and Emmett loved exploiting the differences, hoping to embarrass me. Earned him a few blows to the ribs from me when we were younger. These days, I barely noticed it—an ass grab from my obnoxious brother was as normal as a hug.

“Hope you guys didn't get hernias!” one of the punks we'd played called. He nearly killed himself laughing as he kicked onto his bike.

“Ice those arthritic knees,” razzed another.

Emmett saluted them. “Remember to change your diapers before bed.”

We made our way to our pile of sweatshirts and bags, mopping our foreheads as we walked. Emmett stretched his torso, then cuffed the back of Jimmy's head. “Your feet were cement blocks out there.”

Jimmy shoved him off. “I'd ask you to pass me a Gatorade, but you'd probably miss.”

“Wouldn't want to watch you drink, anyway. Bet you dribble worse than on the field.”

Jimmy snatched a Gatorade from the grass, wrenched off the top, and chucked the bit of plastic at Emmett's face. “Go suck a bag of dicks.”

Travis shot his hand in the air. “Just one is fine.”

We all tossed our heads back at that, except it sent my mind to the pretty little thing at the build earlier—her lips, my dick, and a whole lot of sucking. *Damn*. Not thoughts I should entertain while in workout shorts.

A sting of guilt followed the fantasy, cooling the heat stirring my blood. She may have been the opposite of what I was looking for in a woman, but she hadn't warranted my gruffness today. I shouldn't have coaxed her into showing up to volunteer wearing safety goggles and a face shield, either.

She'd get laughed off the build, and I'd wind up feeling like an ass. Already did, as it stood.

We chugged our electrolytes, the evening air cooling the sweat on my skin. Emmett and Travis took off, leaving Jimmy and me, asses planted on a bench. We watched two kids playing Frisbee.

"How goes the wine world?" I asked.

His elbows fell to his knees, a content smile spreading. "Great. Really fucking great. Being back in Napa is better than I expected. Not sure who I was kidding, thinking I could live without the winery."

I knocked my knee against his. "And Rachel?"

"*Really* fucking great." His smile became something else entirely. "That woman is...everything."

Envy lassoed my heart, the squeeze uncomfortable. I believed in love at first sight. In happily ever after. I believed in touches that healed and kisses that could cut a man down. I also craved the steadiness I'd lacked as a kid. Unfortunately, it wasn't what I wound up with.

Jimmy picked a divot of grass off his sneaker. "Any headway on the divorce?"

Could I end world hunger? "One step forward, ten or twenty back."

He made a pained sound. "If I'd married my ex, I'd be where you are now. Drowning—trying to cut our ties and come up for air. Not sure how you do it."

"No choice, really. Tessa is smart and vindictive. She only knows how to win, and the word *divorce* isn't in her vocabulary. To her, it's a loss. A deficit."

"Sounds like a transaction, not a relationship."

"Pretty much sums up our last few years."

His penetrating stare had me counting blades of grass. "You sure you don't want to talk about it?" he pushed. "Things dragging like this can't make it easy to move on."

He didn't know the half of it. It wasn't just that Tessa didn't like to admit defeat. She never lost. Ever. Other lawyers called her the Sleeper, after those cichlid fish who played dead, then struck their unsuspecting victims. She was angry, hurt that I'd ended things. Now she was intent on ruining my name and sucking me dry in the process. Her accusations that I'd cheated on her were ludicrous, but you almost had to admire her tenacity.

Once her teeth were in you, shaking her was a bitch.

"I appreciate the offer. I *always* appreciate the offer. But we have an autocratic judge on the case. Insists we keep things quiet until the divorce is settled. Lawyer agrees. Anyway, as far as I'm concerned, we're done and over. The courtroom stuff is just semantics. I've moved on. I'm building a life. She'll clue in eventually."

Jimmy grunted, the two of us falling into the type of silence only old friends could abide. Hopefully I wouldn't be broke by the time my divorce was settled. Hopefully I'd meet a woman who wanted to *live* her life, not count her billable hours. A partner who preferred dancing on the beach to driving in rush hour, walking barefoot in the grass to winning the rat race.

A flash of Ainsley's polished toes and dainty feet filled that particular daydream until I schooled my thoughts, unsure why I'd crushed my Gatorade bottle. No point repeating the same mistakes.

## CHAPTER THREE

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Eight letters for the discrepancy list made at the end of a construction job.

*Or* what you'd like to do to the asshole who facilitates your ridicule.

### PUNCHOUT

AINSLEY

Sweat. Lots of sweat. Enough sweat to waterboard a platoon of soldiers. This was no delicate shine or attractive glow, either. I looked like I'd been sprinting in the Sahara, and it was all Rachel and Gwen's fault. I *may* have mentioned I should get in better shape. Keeping Rachel's superstitions in mind, I'd stayed mum about pursuing my birthday resolution and visiting the Habitat build, but my first volunteer session was tomorrow, ratcheting up my nerves.

Remembering how Owen had lifted and moved wood planks—forearms flexing, biceps bulging—had me flushing something fierce. It was also a reminder working on a Habitat site was no joke.

I needed to up my fit factor.

Now I was in Step Class Hell, a charley horse away from face-planting on the linoleum.

“Keep those knees up!” The perky fitness instructor with boobs up to her chin wasn’t even glistening with a hint of perspiration. Not a measly drop. “Work that step, people. And don’t forget to smile!”

Smile? As in slap a toothy grin on my face and pretend my heart wasn’t a live grenade? If I was about to die, I’d do it snarling at Princess McGrin-a-Lot. I turn-stepped and muscled through my three-knee repeaters, glaring my fiercest glare.

An agonizing lifetime later, she flashed her pearly whites, and crowed, “Let’s count it down now! Half-time. Nice and slow. Time to work those quads!”

*Now* it was time to work them? As if I’d been doing what? Sipping fruity drinks at the swim-up bar? If I could lift my quad, I’d shove my hot-pink Nike Free Run up this dictator’s toned ass. Instead I did a zillion squats and over-the-tops.

“Okay. We’re almost there! Keep it up while I help Cynthia for a minute.”

Ex-squeeze me? Cynthia and her two left feet could die a painful, flesh-eating death for all I cared. Mussolini needed to finish this goddamn routine before I painted the floor green with the kale smoothie I’d sucked back earlier.

Gwen glanced at me and snorted. “You look like hell.”

I directed my death-stare at her and tried to say, “Fitting, because I’m pretty sure that’s where I am.” Except it sounded like: “...be...cause...*am*.”

The room was jam-packed with people panting and clomping, the wall of mirrors making me dizzy. My chest cavity was about to rupture.

Needing a diversion, I locked my eyes on Emmett, one step in front of me. We’d never traded two words, but I’d learned his name when Rachel used to work at this gym, because true friends helped friends creep potential crushes. I used to follow him around the like a lost puppy, until I learned he was gay.

The man owned his stepper, whipping around the thing like he was born to it. Not even the sight of his perfect body

could ease my agony. Still, I looked. His rock hard calves balled and tightened. His thighs were strong enough to crush skulls.

And that ass. Glory, hallelujah...*that ass.*

I drooled. May as well add more liquid to the quarts of sweat pooling under my stair. With herculean effort, I lifted my leg, but I wobbled. My toe tripped on the lip of my instrument of torture, and I toppled forward. I landed knee first on the step as the class (thank God and every deity there ever was) ended.

The legs I'd been ogling appeared in front of my face. As did a well-endowed crotch that should have had a sign above it that read, *Sorry, ladies. I'm all about the cock.*

Him and me both.

He extended a strong hand toward me. I took it, grateful. Clumsy wasn't my usual MO, but that was twice this week a handsome man had helped me find my feet. Maybe I was on to something. Once I was upright, Emmett used his tank-top hem to mop the sweat on his forehead. All remaining oxygen vacated my lungs.

Holy abs of steel.

Slap a long wig over his dark curls, and he could be Tarzan's stunt double in a hot second. "Hard class," he said as he dropped his shirt.

Not as hard as his abs. I barely refrained from tipping sideways to watch each inch of delicious flesh disappear below his top. "That woman should be arrested for crimes against humanity."

He chuckled. "If you came more often, you'd get used to it."

God, how I'd like to come more often. Which sent my imagination to a certain construction worker, who no doubt had abs for days under his shirt. Owen also had strong hands. Big hands. Hands that hammered things and *screwed* things, and had wrapped protectively around my waist the other day. I

could have sworn he'd held on longer than necessary, was sure his broad chest had swelled faster as he'd gripped me.

Hopefully the sign above *his* crotch read *Ladies First*.

My savior smiled at me. "I'm Emmett, by the way."

"I know who you are," I said, practically admitting my unrequited crush. "I'm Ainsley."

Gwen slung a sweaty arm over my shoulder. "Hey, Emmett," she said sweetly.

Rachel appeared at my other side. "Emmett, hey. How's it going?"

He crossed his defined arms over his chest and tilted his head. "Do I know you ladies?"

That's when Gwen betrayed our sisterhood. "Nope. But Ainsley was sweet on you, so we've done some basic reconnaissance, which included discovering she's not your type."

A spark of mirth lit his dusky eyes. "I'm not sure if I should be flattered or call security."

"No need," I said. "I'll be revoking their memberships and putting hair-remover in their shampoo." If I weren't red-faced and drenched, he might have noticed my blush.

"Good luck with that," he said, laughing as he left.

I shrugged Gwen off and hefted my equipment into the corner, never to be used again. More often than not, my gym time was spent doing light weights and short stretches of cardio. I also loved leisurely hikes that allowed me to enjoy the scenery as opposed to intense climbs. Just enough exercise to allow me to eat Aazam's chocolate without worrying about my weight.

I wasn't toned like Gwen or tall and thin like Rachel. I was curvy and buxom—my mother's term of choice. I liked it, though. Enjoyed feeling womanly with curves to flaunt and hips to sway. I also loved spending this hour with my girlfriends, today notwithstanding.

Once my step and risers were away, I ended my silent treatment. “I hereby remove you both from my will. Gwen, you will not receive my shoes if I die in step class. Rachel, you will no longer be the proud owner of my Coach purse collection.”

Gwen mimed a knife wound to the heart. “How am I supposed to go on?”

I pushed past her and grabbed my towel from the floor. The crowd had mostly filed out, the three of us lingering in the humid room. Even the walls were dripping.

Rachel dabbed her freckled brow. “It was kind of funny.”

“Because you weren’t the butt of that particular joke.” I stuck my towel down my cleavage, needing a squeegee not a swathe of cotton to deal with this deluge.

“I’m sorry,” Gwen said, “but I couldn’t resist. I mean, lusting after one gay man happens. But two? Next you’ll be hitting gay bars, wondering why no one’s buying you drinks.”

Rachel’s hilarious addition: “Maybe she’ll join gaydar-dot-net to cruise for uninterested men.”

“You should both write for Comedy Central.” My tone was all aspartame as I pulled my towel from my boobs and tossed it at Rachel’s face. “They were honest mistakes. Now, thanks to you two jokers, Emmett knows how pathetic I am. I really need new friends,” I mumbled.

It was an empty threat. The three of us couldn’t have been closer. We were there for Rachel when she’d lost her father, her struggles to keep her mother’s spirits up, and through each of her ten thousand jobs. Gwen didn’t bungee jump or skydive without messaging us first. When she had a tough day at the adoption agency, unable to place a child with a deserving family, we’d rally.

We lifted one another up, and made sure to keep one another grounded, but I’d wear a velour sweat suit before sharing my next crush with them. I’d keep a lid on things until I was sure of mutual attraction.

Rachel cringed, looking sheepish. Or maybe deerish. With her big brown eyes, sun-kissed skin, and spray of freckles, she was more innocent doe than bleating sheep. “Now I feel bad.”

“As you should, but you’re forgiven. I expect a lifetime’s supply of Chardonnay once you open your own winery.”

She raised her right heel toward her bum and grabbed her ankle for a quad stretch. “Like that will ever happen. Maybe when I graduate, if I work up to head winemaker somewhere, I’ll name a vintage after us.”

Gwen ran a towel under her bobbed hair. “You’d have to call it The Ram.”

Our shared zodiac sign.

We all grinned as we headed to the change room, but the horoscope comment was a reminder of our birthday resolutions. The resolution I’d start working on as of zero-eight-hundred hours tomorrow.

If this change could kick start other positives shifts in my life, like it had for Rachel, I needed to make it work. It might lead to an epiphany on ways to continue earning money while shedding my sleazy clients. Maybe I’d meet a contact, someone who could hire my father.

As long as I didn’t encounter any supervillains along the way.

Nausea, familiar in its viscosity, coated my gut, thoughts of my teenage employment reducing me to a puddle of nerves. If I could have a magic do-over, I’d expunge those mortifying years. But there was no ctrl-alt-delete that could erase the ridicule I’d endured at the hands of Anton Bickley.

Light-headed from the workout and remembering my teen hell, I slogged into a bathroom stall but struggled with the lock. Gritting my teeth, I used my remaining energy to crank it in place. After barely holding my toilet-seat hover (yoga’s chair pose should be dubbed the Public Bathroom Pose), my legs neared jelly status.

With my white camo Lululemon tights snapped in place, I twisted the lock to leave, but it didn’t budge. I tried again, and

nothing.

My lungs constricted. Fresh sweat dotted my temples.

*Nothing to worry about. This is just a glitch.*

I used both hands and tugged until my thumbs were ready to snap.

No. No. *Nononono.*

My pulse thundered in my ears. The stall shrunk around me. In an instant, I was throttled back in time to the Chucky's Chicken walk-in fridge, locked inside. Stuck. Panicked. A budding fashionista working in a fast-food chicken joint had been a recipe for disaster. My coworkers had labeled me an airhead. An outsider. Someone to mess with, which included locking me inside the walk-in fridge while I slammed my fists on the door and screamed and cried for an endless hour.

Anton Bickley and his minions had been evil incarnate.

Now I was trapped again, my claustrophobia threatening to strangle me. I couldn't call for help or push enough air through my lungs to squeak. I fumbled harder, my saliva turning to glue. Then it unlatched.

I stumbled out of the stall and slammed my hands on the sink counter, head bent forward as I sucked back air. My eyes and throat burned. My legs trembled. Stupid step class and walk-in fridges and jammed locks. Stupid me for allowing Anton to best me all those years ago. Something that wouldn't happen at the Habitat build.

I was entering unknown territory again, the odd woman out. But I'd purchased my face shield, respiratory mask, and safety glasses. I'd even found a hot-pink tool belt and matching hammer.

I'd never apologize for reading *Vogue* instead of *Pride and Prejudice*, or wearing sunglasses and five-inch heels to turn an outfit into an attitude. I had a bracelet for every occasion, enough shades of lipstick to keep my lips guessing, and I could transform a Zara find into a runway show stopper with the perfect accessory.

Rachel's higher power was wine. Gwen was an adrenaline junky.

I knelt at Fashion Week's altar.

This fashionista wasn't about to go all granola in ratty jeans and a plaid shirt. Growing up was about owning who you were. But I *would* arrive at the Habitat site prepared, looking like I knew how to build a freaking house. Especially since Owen and his big hands might be there.



Monday had me hopping out of bed early. A shower, shave, and perfume later, I smoothed out my blond hair and tied it into a ponytail. I wriggled into my skinny jeans and fitted white tee, the Gucci logo hugging my breasts. No earrings were worn. No bracelets or rings. I tugged the laces of my pink Converse tight, hung my safety glasses and respiratory mask around my neck, then spent a few minutes browsing building terms in my dictionary app.

When I landed on crotch, I cackled to myself. *The "V" shaped assembly of skids that holds sections of pipe in place.* I could only hope and pray I eventually landed on Owen's "V" and "pipe."

Nerves buzzed through my belly as I drove to my first volunteering gig—partly frazzled, but mostly excited. This would be the start of a new me. A better me. Which meant my resolution would kick into action.

As I parked and reached for my face shield, my phone sang out "Daddy's Girl."

I hit Talk. "Hey, Dad."

"How's my princess?"

Most twenty-seven-year-old women would roll their eyes at the endearment. Instead, I chirped, "A client got me ballet tickets. How'd you and Mom like to see *Cinderella*?"

“With you?” His words always sounded more growled than spoken.

“No. I have *two* tickets, and Mom adores the ballet.”

A love she’d passed on to me. She’d twirl me around the house in my tutu and tights while my brother, Jason, would groan and our father would lift me up for the big jumps. He was a bear of a man, my dad—tall and imposing, bushy blond beard, shaved head, tattooed neck. My dates would swallow hard when they’d shake his hand, but he was the man who’d play dress-up with his kids and sing me to sleep.

“Nonsense,” he growled. “You should use them.”

“They’re already in the mail.”

“*Ainsley...*”

“*Mason...*”

He chuckled. “Thanks, princess. Called to tell you I have an interview tomorrow.”

I sat straighter. “Really? Where?”

“Tesla is hiring. Production line. Could be good.”

It could be *amazing*. Auto manufacturing meant stability and good hours and solid wages. “What about your back?”

As he sighed, I pictured him kneading the strained muscles. “It’s better. Definitely better. Doctor gave me the all clear.”

“Then my fingers are crossed for you.” And my toes. And arms. And legs.

Unless Owen got involved.

“I have to run,” I said. “But tell Mom I’ll drag Jason over for dinner soon, and I’m wiring money Wednesday.”

A pause. Then, “Not sure what I did to deserve you kids.”

We hung up, but his defeated tone lacerated my heart.

What he *hadn’t* deserved was to lose two jobs to a crappy economy and injure himself twice. When Graham’s Lumber had closed, and he lost his first forklifting gig, my ballet

classes became too expensive. That day, I caught him crying in the kitchen. My father. *Crying*. Telling my mother he'd failed me. His massive shoulders shook. His gravelly voice cracked. My fourteen-year-old heart shattered.

I vowed then and there I'd move mountains to erase that tortured look from his face. Mountains I'd been lifting for the better part of my life.

I glanced at the clock. Owen had said to arrive at the morning meeting by 8:30 a.m. sharp. 8:29 glowed at me. My first impression might not go as smoothly as I'd hoped. Hurrying, I fitted my cell into my tool belt and straightened the safety glasses around my neck. I secured my respiratory mask over my mouth and put on the face shield, making sure its strap sat above my ponytail.

I was doing this. I was a strong, capable woman who would hold her own on this construction site.

Buoyed by my father's news and my fresh start, I crossed the street at a clipped pace. Trucks lined the road, the dirt-laden area covered in piles of wood and long pipes. Shovels leaned against a wooden workhorse. A couple of tent canopies offered cover, and wall-skeletons jutted from the ground. These would be the foundations of future homes, forever places for many families. If anything was done improperly, a wall could cave in. Mold could grow in a kid's room.

The damp air worked its clammy fingers over my skin. My mask scratched at my nose and cheeks. No matter how many words I'd studied, I didn't have the first clue about construction; my birdhouse in shop class had looked more like the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

Fuchsia hammer fisted in my hand, I forced my feet forward.

The morning sun blinded me a moment. Squinting, I made out a group of volunteers huddled together, orange hardhats on. Once I added one of those puppies to my face shield, mask, and glasses, I'd practically be bulletproof.

Still blinking away the glare, I didn't notice the stares at first, or realize these prepared volunteers weren't wearing the safety apparatus I'd been told was essential. It was the first laugh that clued me in. When the sun spots cleared from my eyes, I saw the whispering. The snickering. A few pointing fingers.

Just like that, I was back in high school, showing up at Chucky's Chicken, the words, "Stupid bitch," whispered so I could hear.

My mouth dried. No air passed through my mask.

Then I saw him. Owen. The traitor who'd put me in this position.

Last week he was all monosyllabic and moody, a little mysterious and a lot handsome as he'd listed the safety gear I "needed." If he'd hoped to embarrass me with his antics, he'd be gloating now. But he wasn't smirking, all pleased with himself. He cringed and hung his head, unable to meet my glare.

*Whatever, asshole.*

Instead of retreating, I rolled my shoulders back and sashayed toward the group, my adorable tool belt swaying with my hips. A few men went from amused to *interested*, their mouths dropping open.

I stood on the outskirts of the team. "Sorry I'm late. But you know, safety first." I knocked my pink hammer against my face shield. "Cap it before you tap it."

My audience laughed at my self-deprecating joke. All but one man. A man I had no intention of acknowledging.

## CHAPTER FOUR

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Eight-letter word for roofing material that protects a building from water seepage.

*Or* when the woman you can't stop fantasizing about exposes herself in public.

F L A S H I N G

OWEN

I'd seen Ainsley twice since the safety-mask debacle two weeks ago. Both times, she showed up in her tight jeans and snug T-shirt and her ridiculous tool belt. (Who knew those things came in pink?) She'd studiously ignored me, and I'd hammered nails within an inch of their lives. If I could retract our first meeting, I would. Redo the whole encounter.

Most of it, at least. Kicking myself repeatedly for the fiasco meant I'd also relived her near fall.

How her waist had felt in my grip.

That part left an imprint on me. Like muscle memory. The way I could go years without kicking a soccer ball, then hit the field and weave between players and bend the ball into the net. My legs just *knew* how to react, and every time I neared Ainsley, my hands burned. They tingled with awareness of how her hips had flared below my touch. The soft give of her middle.

I'd remind myself she hated me, that I wasn't supposed to lust after a woman who wore name-brand clothing as a status symbol. But she was volunteering her time to help the community, and I kept thinking about her sharp tongue and what else it could do. Her quick wit.

Her smell—the one drifting toward me now.

Vanilla and chocolate and something flowery invaded my senses. Not sure how she smelled so sensual with all the dirt and sawdust kicking around the place. She always did, though. I sensed when she was near me. Behind me. Upwind from me. That's when my hands would twitch, wanting to latch around her again.

I swiveled as she and Sherise overlapped a section of synthetic housewrap. The older woman held it in place while Ainsley taped it down, securing the protective barriers that would shield the homes from mold and rot.

It made me think of my rainbow-walled home growing up, a ramshackle house in southern Texas, nothing protective guarding it. It didn't have visible mold, but there'd been no denying its shoddy workmanship. Or the fact that my mother had rarely been there.

The last time I saw her, she took Emmett and me to visit the beach. She had a faraway look about her that day. The one she'd get when high, before she'd disappear for a day or two or seven. She'd piled a collection of beach glass in her lap, while I sat across from her. "When glass is made," she'd said, "it's strong. If it breaks, the edges are sharp enough to cut, but they can be glued back together. Unless it's carried out to sea."

She'd held up a blue piece, and the sun had shot through it like a prism. "Those pieces get swept away. They turn soft from the push and pull of water. From drifting. Those pieces never fit together again."

She'd flitted down the coast then, her long dress and dreadlocks lifting in the wind. I could sense it—that something was different. I was twelve, Emmett ten. We didn't know our fathers, and we'd been cared for by her and the dozen or so hippies living in our commune, but there'd always been people

to kick a ball with, fellow explorers to help search the woods for treasures.

Eternal children content to drift through life like shattered glass.

I'd scoured the beach after my mother had left. Gathered as many pieces of broken bottles as possible, determined to prove they could fit back together. They never did, and she never came back.

Now I was adrift, too, unmoored after a failed marriage, and I'd taken out my frustration on Ainsley, like some insecure jerk.

Sherise nodded to me, but Ainsley didn't glance my way. I busied myself, cleaning up a section of the site. I picked up discarded wood and stray nails, biding my time. Hoping for a minute alone with Ainsley, to finally apologize.

"A blue dress," Ainsley said to Sherise. "Like a deep sky, nothing too ultramarine."

Sherise swatted the air, dismissing her. "I usually wear neutral colors. Nothing too bold."

"Which is *safe*, but blue will highlight your skin. Your eyes will shine. And I know exactly where to go."

Sherise flattened her hands on the wall. "Don't go choosing something flashy. Jerome is my baby. My only child. Being part of the wedding means everything, and I want to look good, but we got to keep the price down."

They moved around a corner, and I inched closer, lurking like a creep. I wasn't willing to let another day go without making amends.

Instead of offering a pitying smile, Ainsley winked at Sherise. "Then it's a good thing you came to me. I'm a personal shopper, but I'm also the queen of sample sales. Looking this fly"—she gestured to her ample curves—"isn't easy."

Sherise coughed out a laugh. "If I had your figure, I'd wear a bikini to the wedding. As it stands, we'll look for a blue

*dress.”*

Ainsley’s grin widened. “You won’t regret it, and I won’t charge you my fee. It’ll be my wedding gift.”

I knelt to collect a pencil, watching Sherise gush over Ainsley from the corner of my eye. Not only did Ainsley volunteer at a Habitat build, she was offering her services for free to a woman she’d just recently met. The superficial girl I thought I should avoid was turning out to be anything but. And she wanted nothing to do with me.

Sherise smoothed down the last wrap. “Let’s grab lunch.”

“Lunch sounds amazing.” Ainsley groaned—a sexy sound that lit a fire in my gut. She kept her focus on Sherise. “I’d say I’m so hungry I could eat a cow, but that would happen on a cold day in hell. I’ll get my stuff and meet you by the bench.”

Sherise left, and Ainsley raised her arms above her head, grabbing her wrist and stretching from side to side. She was likely sore, as I’d been my first month on the job. The good kind of ache. She arched her back, sending her hardhat tipping backward. It lifted and tumbled to the ground, and I didn’t hesitate. Taking my opportunity to corner her, I dropped my wood scraps and snapped up her hat before she could bolt.

“I’m sorry.” I rushed out the words.

She turned and crossed her arms. Her red T-shirt had a worn look about it—frayed at the bottom, a rip at her neck. The type of top designed to look old. Spending cash on that stuff confused the piss out of me. Like I could sell my jeans for a couple hundred bucks because the ass and knees were faded.

But it was the writing across her breasts that had my gaze locked on them longer than was decent:

*A woman without curves is like jeans without pockets.*

*There’s nowhere to put your hands.*

Aw, hell. Now I was fantasizing again, picturing my hands sweeping over the rise of her hips, kneading her full ass as I sank in...

Nope. This was my time to apologize. Explain myself. Salvage some sort of friendship and end the awkwardness between us. She stood silent, not giving me an inch.

I shifted on my feet. “I’m sorry,” I repeated. “That day, when you came by, was a rough one for me. It’s no excuse. I shouldn’t have told you to wear that stuff to the morning meeting. It wasn’t cool, and I’m hoping we can put it behind us. We’re a small group out here. Tension doesn’t do anyone any good.”

Stray blond hairs blew across her face. Her very stoic face. I hadn’t been this close to her since that first day. I forgot how impossibly plump her lips were, how her eyes shone like blue beach glass. It made me wonder if her glass was the type to drift or stick or cut.

I inched forward, and her throat bobbed. Her shoelace was undone, her pink sneakers another cute thing about her.

“It sucked.” Her husky voice took on a softer tone. “Made me feel pretty shitty. I’d wanted to volunteer for a while, and what happened is one of the reasons I’d waited so long. It’s not nice being made the fool.”

Talk about a left hook to the jaw. “The only fool here is me.”

“You got that right.” She studied my face, maybe searching for sincerity. Her shoulders lowered. “But thank you for apologizing.”

Her phone buzzed from her tool belt, but she didn’t grab it. She glanced toward the road, probably looking to escape. I wasn’t ready to let her go. “It’s dangerous to use cellphones on site. You could get distracted, and you should tie your shoelace.”

“Is this you trying to give me handy-dandy tips again?” She backed up against the house, her chin tipped up in defiance. Her eyes still glinted, but not with annoyance. Her attention drifted down my sternum, and lower. It returned leisurely to my face. Warmth dusted my chest.

The construction area had cleared out, most people breaking for lunch. It was just her and me and this heaviness between us. And maybe something else...

I swallowed hard. "People get injured when they're not careful." I'd almost hammered my thumb earlier, watching her bend over.

"I'm not distracted. It's an alarm. I was playing my crossword app when Sherise went to get more tape. Sometimes I give myself a time limit. It's telling me I lost."

"Crossword app?"

"Yes, crosswords. Those games where there's a clue and you have to guess which word fills the space. Maybe you've heard of them?"

She was a snippy little thing. Feisty. I liked it. "I've heard of them. It's not what I expected, is all."

"Because?" Accusation lit beneath her raised brows.

Still holding her hardhat, I ran my tongue along the back of my teeth. I'd seen her on her phone at breaks, scrolling and tapping the screen. I'd assumed she was texting a boyfriend or checking fashion trends. Crossword puzzles were the last thing I'd have guessed.

"I'll let that question lie." I'd no doubt say the wrong thing. I didn't want to end this conversation, either.

It had been years since I'd flirted, and I'd never excelled at it back in the day. My mother had me at fifteen, something that scared the crap out of me. It had kept me away from girls awhile. Until I'd discovered sex. I may have been a late bloomer, but the studious kid I was, I'd made it my mission to uncover the glorious riches of a woman's body. Every canvas was different. Each woman had her own secrets, her body a treasure map.

Treasures I hadn't sought in ages.

Ainsley was the first in a long while to spark my interest, and I was about ready to forget my lawyer's no-dating advice. I'd also vowed to take it slow this time. Make sure I really

knew someone before getting involved. If my flirting skills weren't on the corroded side of rusty, it would make getting to know her a hell of a lot easier.

"You're doing well," I said. "Making a difference on site."

Hope seemed to brighten her face, making her look younger, softer. "Really?"

"Pretty sure you've never used that hammer before, but you're catching on quick."

Her pointed look held more amusement than animosity. "Says you."

"You telling me I'm wrong?"

Instead of answering, she said, "Did you know hammer heads can come loose? That's where the term 'fly off the handle' came from."

I cradled her hardhat against my stomach. It had a worn bit of plastic on top, protruding. I ran my finger over the sharp edge. My hands had a sudden need to keep busy. "You don't say."

"I do. Know what else?" She arched her back, and that rip in her shirt shifted, revealing a tease of purple lace. Damn. *Purple.*

I shook my head in answer, didn't trust my voice to speak. But man, those eyes of hers were stunning, sucking me in again. I'd bet they burned into blue flame when she was coming. The possibility had me wanting to pin her against the wall, feel her surrounding me, grinding on me. Sweat gathered at the base of my spine.

"Well," she said, mischief lighting her face, "according to my online dictionary, there's also a peening hammer. It's used in metal work. There's a cross-peen hammer. A diagonal-peen. Point-peen. Chisel-peen. Like lots of peens that hammer things. Ever used one?" She batted her long lashes at me, dangling her teasing bait to see if I'd bite.

I sure as hell *wanted* to bite. To nibble and lick and kiss. Heat flooded my groin, my thighs flexing automatically. Time

to dust off my flirting skills.

Unfortunately, as I opened my mouth, Sherise called, “You coming, Ainsley?”

The rest happened slowly, then all at once, like loose rocks setting off an avalanche. Maybe Ainsley was as flustered as me. Maybe her limbs felt as heavy as mine. Either way, she moved to face Sherise, but wound up tripping on her shoelace. I went to catch her—a habit with us—but somehow forgot I held her hardhat.

A hat with a sharp piece of protruding plastic.

The point connected with her “worn” T-shirt. She didn’t make a sound as it snagged on the rip by her cleavage. She didn’t wince as the fabric tore to her navel, exposing her lush breasts. A pained sound pushed from the back of my throat as I imagined how they’d feel in my rough hands, against my tongue. Her blue eyes popped wide, and her arms windmilled. A couple guys carrying brown bags glanced our way.

I dropped the hardhat and pressed her to my chest as quickly as possible, shielding her. “Sorry. I forgot I was holding that damn thing.”

“It could be classified as a concealed weapon.”

Her voice sounded strained, but she sank into me. The swells of her breasts against my chest made everything else rigid. My arms. My legs. My *cock*.

I kept my hips back and tried to swallow. Tried not to think about how sexy she looked in that purple bra. Not with the angry, red line blooming on her skin. I barely refrained from testing if she really tasted like chocolate.

Sherise arrived swiftly and pulled Ainsley aside. She threw a plaid shirt over her friend’s shoulders, telling her she’d get something for the scrape. The women walked away, and I watched. Waited. Needed my galloping pulse to slow down. When Ainsley glanced over her shoulder with a seductive smile, it damn near killed me.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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Seven-letter word for warping that causes boards to curl up at their edges.

*Or* when a man cops a feel of your construction hunk, proving you've lusted up the wrong tree *again*.

### C U P P I N G

AINSLEY

I breezed into the offices of Bega, Woodhouse, and Stein and placed a triple, venti, half-sweet, non-fat, caramel macchiato on their receptionist's desk. "Love the haircut."

"Love *you*." Hank blew me a kiss. "And that dress is fierce."

I blew his kiss back at him. My asymmetrical bandage dress *was* a great find. Conservative enough to fit into the law firm's dress code, it also hugged my curves in all the right places.

I sashayed down the long corridor and dropped a box of Aazam's peanut butter cups next to Cindy's phone. "You can thank me later."

My client's secretary snatched up the gift and hugged it to her chest. "You are a goddess."

No. What I was, was smart. Several of my clients worked here, including the philanderer, Thomas Arlington the *third*. Staying abreast of the comings and goings in these corridors was paramount to my business. If you wanted gossip siphoned your way, you didn't butter up the boss. You made nice with the veins of the business—the people who directed the flow of information. Luckily, I didn't have to deal with Thomas today. Today I got to see my favorite client.

“For you, anything,” I told Cindy. “Can I head in?”

“You better. He's about to break into the Glenfiddich.” But her attention dropped to my chest, and she cringed. “That looks painful.”

I touched the scrape running down my breastbone. “It didn't tickle, but it was totally worth it.” The Flashing Incident meant I could relive the feel of Owen's hard body against mine, how his intoxicating cologne of sweaty man and woodchips surrounded me, like pine and apples and masculinity rolled into a package as tantalizing as Aazam's chocolate.

Cindy raised a dark eyebrow. “Sounds intriguing.”

“You have no idea. I'll fill you in another day.” I pushed into Felipe Bega's office, three neckties in my hand.

He looked up from his stack of files. His dark hair was haphazard, like he'd been tugging at it. “You are a goddess.”

I winked. “Seems to be the consensus today.”

His coffee-stained tie had already been tossed on the couch by the windows. I took a moment to enjoy the floor-to-ceiling views, the nicest of any office I frequented. Something about the Golden Gate Bridge awed me: the marvel of modern engineering, how man could connect land and people with ingenuity. Kind of how I felt at the Habitat site. Like I was part of something bigger than myself. Bringing people together, instead of splitting them up.

I rounded Felipe's desk and held up the silk ties against his navy suit. The gray-and-burgundy stripes won, hands down. “Maybe try aiming for your mouth next time you're drinking.”

He snatched the tie and had it fastened and tucked into his jacket in seconds. “I’ll try to remember that.” He tossed some folders into his briefcase, snapped it shut, then exhaled. “I hate being late.”

“Better late and well dressed, than on time and sloppy.”

“Which is why you’re a life saver. Gabriella mentioned needing dresses for our Italy trip. Can you fit her in?”

Like he had to ask. Felipe was a gem of a client. He’d also been my first. He’d hooked me up with many of his colleagues (although slimeballs), and even better, Gabriella happened to be his *wife*. He didn’t dally outside his marriage, as far as I knew. He worked long hours, invested time and money into outreach programs, and he made sure to treat Gabriella to a monthly romantic date.

“Consider it done,” I said, placing the remaining ties on his desk. “These are for next time. You should have spares handy. And a shirt. I’ll leave one with Cindy this week.”

He ran a hand over his hair, smoothing down the wayward strands. “Like I said, you’re a goddess.”

“I prefer the Aphrodite of Fashion, but goddess will do.” I glanced at his desk again, at the engraved glass pyramid commemorating his donation toward a rec center. He’d helped outfit the place with TVs and a sound system, all procured from his brother’s electronics shop. Equipment the Habitat build would need, too.

That addictive pull to do more, give more, had me stopping Felipe before he left. “When you have time, can we talk about a community project I’m working on?”

“Sure.” He grinned at me, dimples flashing on his clean-shaven cheeks. “Nice to see you getting involved.”

He left, and warmth curled around my shoulders, better than if I’d pulled on a cashmere sweater. This do-gooder feeling should be bottled and sold.



Work was busier this week, which meant my two volunteer days had dwindled into one. Eight hours to make this world a better place, enjoy the swoopy feeling of philanthropy, and study Owen for signs of interest. I hadn't seen him since he'd apologized to me and glimpsed my purple bra. Pranking me wasn't cool, but he'd admitted the error in his ways, and the desolation in his furrowed brow spoke volumes. Plus, his hot factor put Emmett's and Aazam's to shame.

I'd also made a vow since then. I would not hit on him or ask him out or flirt shamelessly until I was sure he was straight. Two strikes were enough. This time I'd wait for him to make the first move.

Unfortunately, patience wasn't my strong suit. My strongest suit was a cream Chanel number with pencil skirt and blazer, accented by zebra-print Louboutins. So upon learning he usually volunteered on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I aligned my schedule with his. Today I joined the volunteers for our morning meeting, making sure to stand next to my construction hunk.

He smiled down at me. "Hey, Ainsley."

His grit-laced voice had warmth building under my vintage Levi's. I cleared my throat. "Hey."

I waited for his gaze to drop to my breasts, prominently displayed in a snug T-shirt. The inscrutable man never snuck a glance. I waited for his lips to curl suggestively while noticing my tight jeans. No cigar. Even when I'd flashed him my lace bra our last shift—the sheer material barely hiding my girls—he hadn't focused on my chest. Maybe for a second, but the La Perla cradling my 38 DDs had been more than glance-worthy.

Most men would gawk. Not mysterious Owen, who had covered me up instead.

With his rock hard body.

Sighing, I focused on our meeting. Aside from Owen and Sherise, I didn't recognize any other volunteers. Most shifts brought new workers, people helping out for one day only, or one or two a month. The site manager, Nick—whose thick

mustache gave him a seventies porn star vibe—laid out the day’s plan and began dividing tasks.

He pointed to Owen. “You’ll be assisting me rough in a set of stairs.” I immediately raised my hand. Nick smiled at me. “Yes?”

“If you need someone to lay out the line for the horse and carriage, I could help.”

A muffled laugh came from Owen, and Nick snorted. “It’s a stair horse *or* a carriage,” our site manager said. “Not a horse and carriage.”

Details, details. “I could still help.”

Nick checked his clipboard. “Maybe next time. We need more people framing the roof.”

That left Owen working far from my prying eyes.

The sun was intense today, a late October heatwave that had us all moving extra slowly. And perspiring. Not like Step Class Hell, but I was pushing past a delicate glow. The nutty thing was, I’d stopped caring about my sweat stains after day one. It was hard to focus on that while trying not to hammer my fingers. It was also tough to focus each time Owen (who I’d begun calling *unf*—the uncontrollable sound I’d make when spotting his fine self) emerged to cut lumber on the circular saw.

My current efforts involved holding a ladder so Sherise could take her turn helping frame the roof. The position allowed me to watch Owen, and the sight of him at the saw had fresh sweat trickling between my breasts.

When the veins on his forearms pulsed while pushing the planks through the blade?

*Unf.*

When his jeans stretched across his toned behind as he picked up a fallen piece?

Double *unf.*

He even rocked the face shield.

An hour later, the stifling temperature had intensified. Some of the newbies looked ready to call it quits. Hiking up and down ladders and sawing and hammering was exhausting when working on the surface of the sun. Their sluggish steps and yawns were bad signs, exactly how I'd dragged my butt around my first day. Levity was needed.

I climbed down my ladder and stowed my hammer. "My mascara has melted."

Sherise wiped her brow. "It's hotter than hell. I won't miss working in this heat."

But I'd miss her. This was Sherise's last volunteer shift, other things in her life taking priority. I hated to see her go, but at least we had our shopping expedition planned.

Nick was offering a pep talk to the other volunteers, so we joined the group. As he finished explaining how work got easier over time, I smiled sweetly, and said, "Will we be using caulking today? Because I love using caulking and hoped to get my hands on some *caulk* soon. It's been ages." I grinned.

Nick's rounded cheeks blushed crimson, and the other volunteers eyed one another, until Sherise cracked up. "Girl, you are too much."

That set them all off, the men and women wiping their eyes as they broke for lunch, hopefully ready to return with lighter spirits. Still snickering, Sherise left to meet her son for the break. That's when Owen's deep laugh rumbled from behind me, a bonus to my antics. That masculine sound echoed through the air and up my thighs.

It was clitoris catnip.

I didn't turn, not with my site manager giving me the side-eye. Nick removed his hardhat. "You've been a great addition to the team, Ainsley. Really glad you joined up. Even if you embarrass the heck outta me. Caulking..." he mumbled as he strutted off.

But I was a "great addition."

There was that cashmere again, working its way over my shoulders and wrapping my chest. Volunteering was nothing

like I'd expected. Not only did I get all sappy when I'd remind myself these houses would turn into homes, but everyone accepted me for me.

We all had our reasons for being here: I wanted to atone for aspects of my job, Sherise was a cancer survivor looking to use her time for good. Some wanted it for their résumés, others hoped to learn construction. Whatever brought us out, no one teased me when I messed up. No one called me a stupid bitch for picking up the wrong tool or asking a question.

No one locked me in a confined space.

I hadn't made any connections that could offer my father a job, but the warm glow and comradery volunteering provided made my current job easier to bear.

As did Owen's deep laugh.

His long shadow fell over me. "You certainly know how to make Nick blush."

I turned, wondering if I'd made Owen blush, too. One glance and my breath stuttered. His high cheekbones were flushed, but it was hard to tell if it was me or the sun or the hard work setting his handsome face aglow. "Just lightening the mood."

"It was needed. They were looking rough." His steady gaze locked on mine. It was intense, the way he stared into my eyes at times. Unnerving. "You want to grab lunch?" he asked.

Curls of blond chest hair peeked out of his crewneck. I loved a man with a bit of fur. Something to nuzzle and kiss and rub against. I also wanted to grab the hefty bulge in his jeans and stroke him until he roared, but lunch could be a small step forward. "Since Sherise left, I *will* need a lunch buddy. So if you're offering..."

Again with that penetrating stare. "I'm offering."

"Then I'm in. I'll drop my hardhat and grab my salad." I crossed my toes, hoping more was on the table than food.

A few bungalows were across from the building site, old-growth trees towering on lawns, a canopy of leaves warbling

in the wind. I'm pretty sure they were singing "Afternoon Delight" as we walked. A block down was a small park. Recently gentrified, they'd reused pipes and construction materials to make a playground. A couple kids crowed, all screeches and giggles as they wriggled through the shapes.

We sat at a picnic bench, both of us on the table top, our feet on the bench below. His hip was an inch from mine, his massive beige work boots dwarfing my pink Converse. Warmth radiated from his proximity.

Since I wasn't going to flirt first, I said, "Nice weather."

His reply to my riveting conversation starter: "Yep."

He unwrapped some godawful sandwich, the sliced bread barely containing piles of processed meats. I gaped as he opened his mouth impossibly wide and took a huge bite. His strong jaw worked. He settled his elbows on his knees.

I gagged silently. "You know bologna starts as liquid before it's solidified, right?"

Still chewing, he considered his revolting lunch, then swallowed. "Tastes good." He eyed my tofu salad. "Bet it tastes better than that."

My glass container sat on my lap, and I mixed the tofu with the cucumbers, chickpeas, olives, and Greek vinaigrette. Being vegan meant I had to work at my meals, find the right balance of protein, fats, and nutrition to keep my energy up, never skimping on flavor. Rachel would mock-choke when eating my desserts, but I knew she loved them. "Don't knock it until you've tried it."

"Okay." He laid his sandwich beside him and held out a hand. His strong fingers were thick and callused, his skin dry and peeling in spots. I'd bet my poppy-printed Coach purse they would feel sinful scraping up my inner thighs.

"*Unf.*" I startled at my needy sound, and he raised an eyebrow.

If this were six months ago (PBG—pre broken gaydar), I'd have scooted over until our hips touched. I'd have skewered my fork through a few vegetables and fed him my better-than-

his lunch, watching as my fork slipped past his lips, my tongue (hopefully) following shortly. But this was *post* BG, and I still had no clue if Owen was just being nice, or if he found me attractive, or maybe he found *Nick* attractive. The seventies mustache was pretty cool.

Instead of acting on instinct, I placed my Tupperware in his large hand. He dragged my fork through the vegetables, wrinkling his nose when poking the tofu. He scooped a bite and looked at the blue sky as he chewed. “Flavor wise, really good, but I’ll never get tofu. Tastes like bland mush.”

A curious squirrel nattered from the ground, scurrying closer, then away. Probably scavenging for its next meal. “That’s the cool thing about tofu. It’s a blank canvas. With the right marinade, you can make it taste like anything. Even meat.”

“Or you could just eat meat.” He returned my lunch, ripped off a piece of salami from his sandwich, and tossed it to the squirrel. The rodent squeaked and squawked as it studied its find. Deciding it wasn’t poison, he snatched it up and ran under the table.

“I’m vegan,” I said.

Owen squinted at my fuchsia belt. “But you wear leather.”

“It’s not an animal-rights thing. It’s more of a scarred-for-life thing.”

That had him twisting toward me. “I’m afraid to ask.”

I hadn’t relived this particular story in years, never shared those humiliating days with friends, let alone a guy who had me all *unf*. Yet here I was, for some odd reason, going tell-all with Owen. “I worked this job in high school, at a fast-food chicken and burger joint. I didn’t fit in with my co-workers, and my nemesis, Anton Bickley, liked to facilitate my embarrassment.”

And call me Little Miss Priss when telling everyone I didn’t know a chicken thigh from a leg. I ground my teeth. “So anyway, meat wasn’t my favorite. I ate it, but working with it grossed me out. Anton knew it was an issue. He also knew

when I formed our burgers that I'd turn my head when dipping my hand into the ground beef, unable to watch. Like when my blood is taken."

Owen stole an olive from my lunch and popped it into his mouth. "I do the same with blood," he said around his bites.

"Right? So I'd grab handfuls of seasoned beef and mush them together without looking. I didn't know there were maggots inside. When I finally looked, they were on my hands and wrists. I screamed and ran around like a chicken with my head cut off." I stabbed at a bruise on my wrist. "Anton must have set a batch aside, knowing my shift was coming up. Like room-temperature aside. I didn't have proof, but I caught him high-fiving people afterward."

"I think I hate this Anton kid."

Owen's voice roughening in my defense should have sent a dippy feeling through my belly, but a ball hardened in my gut. "It was traumatic, to say the least. I never ate meat again."

He didn't laugh, didn't crack a joke or brush it off. His cheekbones sharpened like they did when he seemed upset. "I'm sorry, Ainsley—for that first day you volunteered. I was as big of a jerk to you as that guy. Really feel like shit about it."

His knee swung wide, gently brushing mine. Like the leaves scraping against one another in the wind. He had no clue I was also upset over a revenge prank I should never have pulled on my nemesis, but something about his proximity, his deep voice, eased my guilt.

"Thank you. It was a crappy time in my life, for many reasons, but I know you didn't mean to be malicious. I also know it won't happen again."

He held up three fingers. "Scout's honor. But I still think tofu is nasty."

I picked up my salad. "Your loss."

Silence settled between us. He devoured his gross deli meat, while I munched on my veggies, sneaking the odd glance his way. The leaves above sent diamonds of shade

cutting across our shoulders. Our squirrel poked its head out from below the bench and sniffed around for more food. My presumptuous hunk stuck his thick fingers into my lunch, stole a piece of tofu, and launched it for the little guy.

I elbowed his arm, barely making a dent. “Thief!”

He shook his head. “Scientist, not thief. Let’s see what he does.”

The squirrel squeaked and nudged the morsel. He paused. Then he repeated the inquisition. Next thing we knew, the cutie became irate, nattering at us in a high-pitched shrill that had us flinching. The rodent, who could double as a *Game of Thrones* villain, dashed for another picnic bench, ready to harass someone else.

Owen smiled at me, the first full grin I’d seen him unleash, and I nearly flew off the bench. That smile was a blast of sunshine. Joy in a rugged, dimpled package. It was riding in a convertible, the wind whipping at my face.

“Like I said, nasty.” His grin turned smug.

I tried to contain my erratic heart. “Or your palate is as sophisticated as a squirrel’s.”

He chuckled, that delicious rumble amping up his hottness, and I clenched. *Clitoris catnip*. I also relaxed. Chatting with Owen was nice. I mean, his superhero smile and worn denim were as tempting as a Calvin Klein sample sale—I worked those sales hard and fast, and *always* came out satisfied—but this was different. A slow burn had warmth simmering low in my belly, promise in its lazy spin.

As we finished our food, both our cells buzzed.

“Jinx,” I said as we fiddled to get our phones. His smile hit me full force again.

Thirty seconds later, we both said, “*Shit*.”

I repeated my “Jinx,” but Owen’s levity had vanished. He blinked his long lashes and tossed his cell onto the wood table harder than necessary.

I reread my father’s text.

Dad: Good news and bad. Didn't get the Tesla gig, but I'm on their list now. If something comes up, they said they'll call.

"You okay?" Owen asked.

"Fine," I replied automatically. The way people said they were swell even if they'd just lost a limb. Social pleasantries. But this was the man who'd listened to my Maggot Incident. With him, the memory stung less.

"Actually, no. Not fine. My father has been out of work on and off forever. He had something lined up, but got passed over. Probably for someone younger, with a stronger body." I focused on my shoelaces, one bow tied larger than the other. "My mother works two waitressing jobs, and I've helped out since high school and pay their mortgage now. I think it makes him feel less of a man."

Owen's hand drifted to my back, his large fingers splaying from the band of my jeans up my spine. "Can't be easy for him, but sounds like he's lucky to have you."

I leaned into his touch, the action magnetic, so much heat focused in that one spot. "He says that all the time. Kind of breaks me."

"I never knew mine," he said quietly. His strong profile had become all sharp angles and serious lines. "My brother and I have different fathers that neither of us have met. We grew up on a commune in Texas with a hippie mother who couldn't handle being tied down by kids, so my grandmother stepped in. We moved to San Fran to live with her, spent our teen years here."

"Sounds like growing up was rough."

"At times. But my nana is great." His voice curled around the word *nana*, a lilting twang I'd yet to notice. It melted my remaining sanity. "I get it, though," he said, "supporting those you love and growing up faster than you should."

Owen's hand stayed on my back, his thumb drawing mindless circles. Circles I felt *everywhere*. He wasn't looking at me, but I could sense his attention, his understanding filling

the cracks I rarely showed. Also, *unf*. Could he feel my breaths deepen? Did he sense how his touch sped my heart? If he didn't make a move soon, I'd have to risk rejection and ask him out.

When he glanced my way, our gazes snagged. Intensity shone again, like I was a riddle he'd been spinning, the answer out of his grasp.

“What about you?” I asked, trying not to sound as unsettled as I felt. “Your *shit* sounded as frustrating as my *shit*. And...wow. That came out way grosser than intended.”

His answering grin didn't reach his eyes. “Also not fine, but something I'm dealing with.”

He didn't elaborate, and I didn't ask more. This was casual, after all. Having had challenging childhoods gave us common ground, nothing more. And I wasn't looking for serious, not after the hell my ex had put me through. All I wanted was a fun night. Or two. Or three. Which meant it was time to forget my concerns and get this party started. Find out if Owen was picking up what I was putting down.

I struck a pose—chest out, lashes lowered. I unleashed my most seductive smirk. His attention focused on target.

Step one, a success.

Step two was the challenge. “So, I've been thinking—”

“Owen!”

We both rubbernecked in the direction of the voice...

And my ability to speak vanished.

*What the frick is Emmett doing here?*

“Give me a sec.” Owen stood and jogged toward my gym Adonis, the two of them huddling on the curb.

Hot, meet hotter.

Emmett squinted my way, shading his eyes in the direct sunlight. He probably couldn't see me clearly, but I covered my face with my hair, just in case. Last thing I needed was him telling Owen I'd followed him around the gym. I watched

them through my curtain of blond, stared as Emmett placed his hand on Owen's shoulder. It could have been nothing. Just two guys catching up. But they stood close. Too close? Like they were a couple? Boyfriends, maybe?

When Emmett dropped his hand to cup Owen's fine posterior and give him a squeeze, shock cramped my gut.

My construction hunk must be gay.

I was sure he'd been looking at me with interest before, a hint of lust or desire darkening his gaze. But my instincts in the sexuality department hadn't proven accurate thus far, and there was no denying the closeness between these two men.

How could this happen? A-freaking-gain?

My gaydar wasn't just broken. It was smashed, splintered, and had been set on fire. I could never trust my intuition again. At least I hadn't asked him out, and thank *God* I'd never mentioned my crush to Gwen or Rachel.

## CHAPTER SIX

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Nine-letter word for an expert evaluation of property.

*Or realizing the woman giving you mixed signals could be your perfect fit.*

A P P R A I S A L

OWEN

I thought Ainsley was into me. Attracted, at least. We shared a moment on that picnic bench, a connection beyond the build and me coming to her rescue. I could have sworn she was about to ask something personal before Emmett turned up. Then she bolted and barely spoke with me the rest of the day. Four weeks and seven lunches later, I still couldn't tell which end was up with her.

“I had no idea there was a vegan food truck in the area.” She swayed side to side, a healthy distance from me, arms folded over her chest.

I smirked at her, ready for our usual banter. “There was an excess of grass from a nearby field. No point tossing it out.”

“Or the mystery meat they used came to life and cannibalized the entire truck, leaving behind only things of nutritional value that don't birth maggots when left in the heat.”

“Sounds plausible.” I appraised the letters painted on the lime green truck: The Vegan Wagon. A brightly colored lettuce “man” was drawing a gun from his holster, ready to kill a rib-steak robber with a shot to the eye. It was a retelling of John Wayne’s classic *The War Wagon*, complete with cowboy hats and metal spurs.

She glanced at me over her shoulder. “I could dig up some worms if the veggie fare isn’t enough to fill you.”

I rubbed my belly. “Had eggs and half a cow this morning. Should be good. I set aside some sawdust for you, though. In case you’re hungry later.”

“You’re sweet.”

“I know.”

We grinned at each other.

I loved this, how easy joking was with Ainsley. How relaxed I now felt around her. Tessa’s intellectual crowd hadn’t always been my speed. I could put in the time, make conversation and have a decent evening, but I’d been a Clydesdale surrounded by Thoroughbreds, and Tessa would often shoot me scathing looks.

My fists clenched at the memory, a typical reaction when anything Tessa came to mind. But I was with Ainsley, and being with her was as easy as breathing. Except I wanted to do more than breathe. I wanted to explore and touch and hear how loud I could make her moan. If she felt the same crack and sizzle every time she looked at me, it would be a hell of a good time.

The line of five vegans inched forward while we studied the chalkboard menu. Her attention drifted to a woman in white nearing us. Tessa had a suit like that, but cut low in the front. She’d wear it when pitted against male attorneys. A master manipulator at every turn.

I flexed my hands again, tired of anger always following thoughts of my ex. Tired of her occupying my head space, period. My lawyer’s e-mail this morning hadn’t helped.

*Tessa rejected last week's house offer, he'd written. She believes it's below value, even though I sent comparative sales in the area. I'll dig up more data. Get prepared for next time.*

Sighing, I scuffed my boot over the asphalt.

Ainsley pulled a business card from her back pocket and held it toward the woman. “Jade pumps and a matching purse would be fierce with that outfit. Your eyes would look even more stunning.”

The woman's face slammed into hard lines, probably unsure if Ainsley was insulting or complimenting her, but the comment had me relaxing. I knew Ainsley well enough to know it wasn't just a business tactic. Although she was trying to gain a client, it was nice being around someone who looked for the beauty in her surroundings.

I studied the woman's eyes. An intense green next to her red hair. “Have to agree. Your eyes are beautiful.” And Ainsley was good at her job.

The redhead's hardness melted away. She plucked Ainsley's card from her hand. After scanning it, she then scanned *me*, a slow perusal from head to toe. “Thanks. Do you two work together?”

“She's my assistant.” Couldn't help myself.

Ainsley shot me a scowl. “*He* struggles with basic math. We're working at a Habitat for Humanity build. I help him with his numbers.” I bit back a laugh, but she didn't miss a beat. “My stunning ensemble”—she gestured to her clothing—“is purely functional, but personal shopping is my paying gig. If you're interested, call me. All I need is ten minutes in your closet.”

My strangled laugh turned into a muffled groan. Ten minutes in a closet with Ainsley. *Damn*. Might have to hire her myself.

The redhead slipped Ainsley's card into her purse. “Maybe.” Her next glance at me held more heat, her attention lingering on my lips.

There was no spark. No moment where my mind went fuzzy and limbs turned heavy and chest grew tight like with Ainsley. What *did* have my temperature rising, were the daggers Ainsley was staring at her. Like she was jealous. Like she was ready to claim me as her own.

A notion I could get behind.

Except she crossed her arms and refused to look my way. Women were confusing as all hell, but I was partly to blame. Her hot-and-cold routine was tough to read. No denying that. If I got too close, she'd lean or step away. If I placed my hand on her back or arm or elbow, she'd shrug me off. But I hadn't asked her out to dinner, not even for drinks. After the Tessa fiasco, I wasn't sure I trusted my instincts when it came to women. Getting closer also meant explaining my divorce and the fact that my ex believed I'd cheated on her.

Would Ainsley trust that I'd never betrayed my wife? Or would she assume the worst like my D.C. friends and cut our ties?

Maintaining our status quo seemed less daunting.

Lunches in hand, we retreated to our picnic table and struck our usual pose—side by side, sitting on the table top, our feet on the bench below. Our white ash tree shaded us. Ainsley was eating a cactus and chili taco, while I crammed the first of two falafel pitas into my mouth.

Manual labor was hungry work, and truth be told, I missed my heartier lunch. Hopefully Nana was making her famous meatloaf tonight. Between Emmett and me, we could polish off two loaf pans.

A few quiet minutes in, our ornery squirrel made his appearance, nattering incessantly. Ainsley growled at the little guy. "I'm not tossing you a crumb so you can turn your nose up to it."

He screeched some more. The rodent really dug his meat, too. "We should call him Joe."

She scoffed at me. "More like Ivan the Terrible."

I tore off another bite and chewed. "Genghis Khan."

“Attila.”

“Stalin.”

“Definitely Lucifer,” she said. “Or we could end the twerp. Put him and us out of our misery.” She licked some sauce from her wrist. A slow slide of her tongue over her pulse point.

My heart rate kicked up. “Where I come from we don’t shoot vermin when they get ornery. We tame ’em.”

She cackled at my John Wayne impression. “Did the vegan food mess with your vocal chords?”

“John Wayne. It’s a line from the movie the truck’s named after, except horses not vermin. I took creative liberties.”

“Still have zero idea what you’re on about.”

I shoved the last bit of falafel into my mouth, remembering nights growing up as I swallowed. “Instead of cartoons or sitcoms, my nana would put on black-and-white films—*Casablanca*, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, *Singin’ in the Rain*. Old Westerns, too. Loved those and the musicals best. We’d even dance sometimes.”

“Is that so?” Her husky voice turned dreamy.

I bet spinning Ainsley around a dance floor would be heaven. “You dance?”

She crumpled her garbage and placed it next to mine. Avoiding my eyes, she plopped onto the far bench seat and lay down, blue eyes on the dancing leaves above. “I did ballet until high school. Loved it. I had to stop when it got too expensive, but it was everything to me.”

Taking her cue, I lay down on the opposite bench, boots wide on the grass below. I laced my fingers over my stomach. “What were you like in high school?” I rolled my head to face her.

She frowned at the passing clouds. “It’s the perfect temperature for hiking, don’t you think? Not too warm.”

She was evading my question, but her comment piqued my interest. “You hike?”

“Not as often as I’d like, but I try to get out once a month. I like the quiet, the fresh air.”

“Really?” I winced at the surprise in my tone.

Ainsley shot me a look. “Yes, *really*. When money got tight at home, my family started going on weekly hikes. It was free and fun, and I still love it.”

I wasn’t about to admit I’d misjudged her again, that I wouldn’t have guessed she’d choose trekking through mud over shopping the strip. I loved how she kept surprising me, each nugget I learned upping her appeal. “High school,” I repeated, hungry for more.

“You’re persistent.”

“I’m interested.”

Her brow pinched. “I was a loner.”

Something I couldn’t envision. She was snarky with a sarcastic wit all her own, always coaxing smiles from the volunteers. I couldn’t picture her sullen or friendless.

I stared at her. She stared at the sky. Twisting her fingers, she seemed ready to ignore the subject. Then she stilled her hands. “My father had lost his job, and I worked as many hours as possible at Chucky’s Chicken. That left me studying into the wee hours of the morning and spending my days trying not to fall asleep, only to deal with Anton’s little shop of horrors in the evenings. All in all, high school sucked.”

Hearing she’d been bullied at work still infuriated me. We all did senseless things as teens, but demoralizing others because they were different—no matter the reason—scratched at the memories of Emmett’s struggles. *Fairy. Faggot. Queer.* My brother had made a pass at the wrong guy in high school. The fallout had ended with him enduring every slur invented, and one beat-down I wasn’t around to stop. But I’d stopped a lot of them. Ainsley’s melancholy made me want to hop back in time and pummel that Anton punk.

“What about after high school?” I asked, hoping to erase her frown lines.

They diminished slightly. “Post high school was an improvement. I landed a job at Barney’s, which required no deep frying or paper hats. I also saved a man’s life by finding his wife the perfect dress. His name is Felipe Bega, and he became my first personal shopping client.”

Our conversation moved, expanding into the corners of our lives. I learned she never went to college and got a thrill out of jumping in waves. She yearned to visit Morocco and explore their leather tanneries. She had me talking, too. I found myself listing my teen jobs, how I’d searched out the only stables near San Francisco and had mucked stalls for cash.

“I loved the cowboy hats and boots,” I said. “Was awed by the raw power the horses possessed.”

“They are gorgeous creatures.” Her blue eyes locked on me, warm and probing. “How’d you end up working a desk job?”

“I’ve always been good with numbers, analytics. It came easy to me, and I knew I could make money doing it.”

“And now?”

I heaved a heavy sigh. “Now I’ll be happy if I never see a computer again.” Downright ecstatic. “When I moved here, I helped a neighbor redo his basement. That led to other odd fix-it jobs, enough to keep me afloat, but my plan is to build a carpentry business.”

“While wearing a cowboy hat?”

I almost laughed, but she was cutting closer to a nerve than was comfortable. “I still love watching Westerns, but that was more of a teenage fascination. I was a bit lost back then.”

She continued studying me intently. “How so?”

Someone had etched illegible initials on the underside of the picnic table. I picked at a splintered piece of wood cutting through what looked like an S. “Bill, who ran the ranch where I worked, was a real gentleman. He’d compliment the women and joke with the men. Always tip his cowboy hat. Guests would arrive early and leave late, because he treated them nice. I started emulating him. Made for some laughs at my

expense, but I did that a lot. Watched men—in life and in movies—wondering how I was supposed to act.”

“Did you ever ask your mother who your father was?” Her compassionate voice shrunk the distance between us.

“When I was old enough to realize the men who moved through my life weren’t related, I’d ask. She’d answer something vague like, ‘We’re all children, together.’ Probably hippie speak for *I don’t know*.” I stopped fussing with the splintered table and faced Ainsley, more truths tumbling out. “I actually thought my mother was a fairy for years, assumed she’d shrink and fly away when she’d disappear.”

I’d never shared that silly childhood belief before. With anyone. Not sure why I was opening up to Ainsley. Not sure why my chest was warm and full and tight at once.

We stopped speaking, only watched each other, both of us breathing heavier. The table top between us made it feel like we were in an intimate fort. Our lunch hour finished five minutes ago. We both knew it. Neither of us moved. There was more awareness now. A better understanding of who we were.

Maybe this was what I’d been waiting for. To know this thing with Ainsley was deeper than an intense attraction. And it *was* intense. That spark and sizzle was back, crackling along my too-tight skin, snaking up my rigid thighs. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips, something like longing on her face. In that instant, I’d swear she felt it, too.

Then she shot to her feet. “I need to pee before our shift. I’ll meet you there.”

And she was gone.



“You keep sucking on that empty beer, you’ll inhale the glass.” Emmett tossed his napkin at my head. Nana flicked him behind his ear, and he rubbed his skin. “Jesus. That stings.”

“It’s supposed to sting.” She collected his plate and came around to reach for mine.

I placed my hand on her thin wrist, nothing but bones beneath my touch. “Let me.”

She flicked my neck too, and I winced. “If you treat me like I’m about to break, I *will* break. Let me do my thing.”

I raised my hands in surrender. “Fine. But I plan on helping out.”

Her eye roll was nothing but a ruse. This was our time, our thing. Emmett would stretch on the couch, lazy fucker that he was, and Nana and I would stand side by side at the counter.

Her house was narrow, an old Victorian home in the Dogpatch. This area may have been nothing but docks and industrial buildings when she’d first bought it, but it had transformed by the time she’d brought us here from Texas, breweries and restaurants popping up. Her house hadn’t changed much, though. Lace curtains still hung on the windows, the yellow walls and green Formica table far from trendy.

Not much had changed, but it all felt smaller, the ceiling lower. Her tiny frame barely met my shoulders.

Etta James crooned from the CD player I’d bought her. She reached into the sink, suds swishing as she washed the dishes. “What’s the latest from the hussy?”

Nana never minced words. She’d also never liked Tessa. “The usual.”

Her rough scrubbing nearly sent the water sloshing on the floor. “Don’t pull that tight-lipped nonsense with me, Owen Phillips. You may be all mum with your friends, but I’ve seen what happens when your frustration festers.”

That she had. When she’d first taken us in, I didn’t talk much. I thought I was fine. I said I was fine. But I’d felt numb. Nana had us doing chores, hours of homework, and she’d get to flicking our ears if we cussed. I’d tell myself I just missed the lax rules of our commune. It wasn’t until she’d sat me down and stared at me in silence for hours that I opened my mouth.

What came out surprised the heck out of me: anger. *Outrage*. Frustration I'd never voiced about my mother's selfishness, all spewed in a choking rant...and Nana listened. She didn't defend her daughter. Didn't talk me down or wind me up.

She just listened.

When I'd had snot dripping down my face, my chest sore from heaving, she'd said, "It doesn't matter who your mother is. Your father could be James Dean for all I care. What matters is the boy you are. The man you become. Be good to your family, your brother. Treat women right. No one is responsible for your behavior and personality but you."

Simple words from a simple woman. I'd still spend time playing make-believe in my head, imagining myself a wrangler, Fred Astaire, a soccer star. Roles and stories that weren't mine. Trying to figure out how to be a good man, someone who wouldn't abandon his kids one day. I'd also worked hard to rid myself of my Southern twang and the memories that came with it. But Nana told me what I'd needed to hear at the time. A reminder now she'd always listened to me without judgment.

I still hadn't told her how off the rails Tessa had gone. The details would worry her and ratchet up her already-hateful feelings toward my ex. But I'd been slipping lately, getting down about the state of things. Maybe it was time to unload. "Things are rough with Tessa."

"Because of the assets? Selling the house?"

"Yes and no. Every time we have an offer, she refuses it. Claims it's too low, that she has no intention of giving it away. We have a few things that need appraising, too. She goes through the same routine each time. At this rate, we'll be divorced in three years."

"That woman doesn't need the money, so why drag things out?"

She passed me a wet plate to dry. More like rammed it into my hand. I eased it from her grip. "Because she's angry. Wants

me to spend all my cash on lawyers.”

“That little—”

“Yeah, I know.” I cut her off, needing to say the rest. Get it out and off my chest. The way Tessa had dragged things out the past eight months, I’d heeded the judge’s warning and hadn’t discussed the proceedings. When my lawyer suggested I not date until it was all tied up, I’d listened, too. I hadn’t been ready for a while, as it stood. Until Ainsley, even though her mixed signals were sending me for a loop.

It was time I regained some control.

Etta James’s raspy voice vibrated through the room, the swish of the dishwasher comforting. I flipped around and parked my ass against the counter. “Tessa’s claiming I cheated on her. Telling everyone we know.” Nana froze, and I hunched forward, the words tasting as bitter as they sounded. “She’s a damn good actress, so most believe her, which hurts. But not as much as her vindictiveness. It’s like she can’t understand how I could have left her, was blind to the fact that we hardly talked anymore. Never spent time together. She believes, or claims at least, I was off having an affair. Blames me for us falling apart.”

Lungs shrinking, I twisted my dishtowel until I’d tied it in a knot. Exactly how my insides felt. “I’ve been worried about telling you, didn’t want you thinking less of me. And I just don’t get how I could have loved her once. Or maybe I didn’t. Maybe I got lost in feeling like I belonged to someone.” I huffed out a defeated laugh. “When did I become so oversensitive?”

Nana paused at the sink. She waited. When she was sure I’d said my piece, she squeezed my bicep. “You’ve always been the sensitive one. And I would *never* think less of you. Would never believe filthy lies. You and your brother are stuck with me in your corner, like it or not. I just don’t want this to taint your feelings toward relationships. You’re a good man. A kind man. You deserve a sweet woman, and there is a lucky lady out there who will be deserving of you. Now let’s wash these dishes.”

She returned to the sink, dipping her wrinkled hands in the soapy water, swaying to the music. I dried the dishes and let her words wash over me. I hadn't realized how much I'd needed to tell her about Tessa's accusations, hear her indignation and know she'd never buy into that slander. Another reminder this divorce was barely progressing. Maybe I'd fly back to D.C. soon, see if face time could hurry things along.

"Is there mint chip in the freezer?" Emmett's booming voice blasted in from the living room.

"Get your lazy butt in here and check for yourself," Nana bellowed back.

A moment later, Emmett snuck up behind her and planted a kiss on her cheek. "You're scary when you're bossy."

She patted his ass. "Just keeping you in line. Speaking of which, have you found a nice man to settle down with longer than a week?"

"I'm having fun. Isn't variety the spice of life?"

"For now, maybe. Eventually it's the ingredient for a TV dinner cooked for one."

An hour later, she sent me home with leftover meatloaf and the soap she sold at a local market. Apple spice, she called it.

Before long I was hunched over the dinner table in my workshop. It had been my project the past month, a stunning slab of tiger maple. Perfect width, its live edges rustic yet clean. I'd kept the legs simple and elegant. They allowed the top to shine. I sanded every inch methodically, working from 120-grit paper to 220.

Tonight was when the magic happened. My first coat of Tung oil. The astringent, barnyard smells burned my nostrils, and I said a silent *thank you* for the wide garage doors.

One of the best things I'd done since moving back to the area had been renting this space. Oakland was close enough to San Fran that I could be in the city in half an hour, but far enough to find an affordable place with a workshop. The

apartment above was small and clean. All I needed for now. Finding financial stability drove me for a lot of years. It was only in the past couple I realized I'd been happier with less.

Having made good money in D.C. meant I could take my time now. Pay my rent by installing countertops or fitting new doors or replacing rotting wood decks on the fly, all while building a small inventory of handmade furniture. When I had my finances sorted, I'd source out a shop or two to sell my pieces.

My business—by me, for me, from the ground up.

One stroke of my brush, and the table's colors flickered to life—sands and peaches and vanillas catching the light. I didn't use stains or dyes, preferring to retain the natural wood grain. I moved my body with each long stroke.

Not sure what time I finished the first coat. It was always like this when I worked with wood. I'd lose myself. Forget my worries. I chuckled, thinking of the dirty jokes Ainsley could spin about me working with my "wood," but man, did I *love* building things. The knowledge made me regret sticking with investment banking so long and giving my marriage more energy than it had deserved. I'd been nothing but restrained the past few years, and it was wearing on me.

Inside, I felt a little wild and desperate to break free. Itching to shed the past and seize my future. Which meant I should heed Nana's advice and not let my failed marriage stop me from trusting my heart. Not let this Ainsley opportunity slip away.

The more I got to know Ainsley, the more she seemed like exactly who I wanted to date. She was easy to talk to and generous with her time. She could make a trucker blush with her dirty humor and worked hard to support her parents. She was also sexy as sin, her smoky voice and swaying hips more sensual than listening to Etta James. There was a chance I'd read Ainsley's lack of interest wrong, my dating hiatus dulling my senses. Whatever the case, next time I saw her, likely two days from now, I'd toss my hat in the ring and ask her out.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Six-letter word for specifications that limit property usage.

*Or embracing your crush's (unfortunate) sexuality by redefining your relationship from friends to sexual confidants.*

### Z O N I N G

#### AINSLEY

Today had been hairy. Not the kind where I got to run my fingers through Owen's dusting of chest hair, as dreamy as that sounded. This day involved me actually wearing my respiratory mask while helping Nick cut insulation and push it into walls.

"How many of these caves do we have to fill?" I asked.

"Two more homes, and they're called cavities."

"That's what I said."

"Don't kid a kidder."

We went about our work.

I'd arrived late, stuffed a crap-ton of *cavities*, and was ready to call it a day. Owen had spent most of his time helping the electrician run wires, so lunch had been a solo endeavor. There was no one for me to nag about eating meat. No one to laugh with over Nick's newly gelled moustache. I even had to

face Lucifer alone, the rodent nattering at me from his grass throne.

Spending time with Owen's *unf* self was challenging and mouth-watering and painful, but I missed him. I didn't normally do picnic-table lunches with men. Especially not ones where we lay on our backs, the wind kissing our faces, not an inch of our bodies touching as we shared personal stories. Owen Time was as thrilling as touring an uncharted clothing shop, new treasures at every turn.

I craved my Owen Time. I also had to get my cravings for *him* under control.

Glad to be done for the day, I whipped off my hardhat and mask. The fresh air was cool and damp, gray clouds frowning down. A few raindrops would be a welcome refresher. I spied Owen's fine behind poking out of the electrician's van, the two men rummaging through equipment. A familiar longing tugged at my belly, desire curling in a tight knot. I had a serious problem. Was becoming quite a creeper, stealing lusty glances at my new gay friend. He made me feel fourteen again, those yearning-filled days spent dropping red-lipped kisses on Justin Timberlake's *Tiger Beat* photos, no chance of ever dating my crush.

Assistance was required.

I fished my phone from my pink tool belt. Rachel's school hours made her less reachable these days. I dialed Gwen.

Two rings later, she said, "You have impeccable timing."

"Please don't tell me you're standing on a cliff edge." Last time she was about to bungee jump, she conference called Rachel and me, hollering, "I love you bitches," before she leapt off a mountain. The woman was certifiable.

"Nope. I was thinking the three of us should take a girls' trip. You know, for our twenty-eighth birthday next year. Roatán is on my radar. Killer snorkeling. I can scuba dive, and you two can sun on the beach. There's a cool town with bars and everything. What do you think?"

I either needed to earn more cash to make that happen, my father had to secure a steady job, *or* I could win the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament and make good use of that jackpot. “Love the idea, but not sure I can swing it. How about a solid maybe?”

Her answering sigh had me cocking my head. Gwen was generally upbeat. She loved her job at the adoption agency, was part of that weird CrossFit cult, and she could have her pick of men, if so inclined. She was also the one of us three girls who doled out the best advice. She called us on our bullshit, preferring to tell hard truths than sugar-coat them. That trait made her a savant when analyzing prospective parents for adoption. It also meant she was a doer, not a wallower.

“What’s with the heavy sigh?” I asked.

Silence answered me. Then, “My mother is sick.”

Sucking a sharp breath, I went to cover my heart with my hand, but I smacked my dangling face mask. “How sick?”

“The C word. So I went to see her, the first time in a couple years. We fought. Couldn’t even have a normal conversation. Now I’m sitting here, trying to figure out if I’ll be upset if she dies, and I’m planning a vacation because the idea of getting away from her and these uncomfortable feelings is the only thing making me feel better. I’m a horrible person.”

“You’re honest, love. That’s more than most people can say. And I’m sorry. Do you plan to spend time with her? Patch things up?” As tough as things had been for me growing up, my family was close. Gwen and her mother had waged their own civil war. Partly because her mother was a crotchety bitch, but she’d also refused to tell Gwen who her father was. Just like Owen’s mother.

They were both so well adjusted, considering.

“Unlikely. For now, I’ll keep researching Roatán and picturing beaches. Sorry to hijack the conversation. Why’d you call?”

My gaze drifted over the muddy ground, tool boxes, and piles of wood. It landed squarely on my construction hunk. *Creeper*. “I have found myself in a pickle, but if I tell you about it, you can’t make fun of me.”

“Hell to the no. I just told you my mother is sick. Making fun of you will distract me.”

Not much I could say to that. “It happened again.”

“You scored another Gucci purse?”

“Don’t I wish. No. My recent pattern of male crushing has resurfaced.”

She gasped. “Another gay man?”

“I have a problem.”

Her cackle had me holding the phone away from my ear. “This is the best! I mean, maybe it’s a fetish. Maybe, subconsciously, you want a threesome with a couple of beefy men. Or you’re a voyeur and want to watch them. Which actually sounds pretty hot.”

“Don’t make me regret telling you.”

She laughed harder, and I glared at a darkening cloud, wondering if I could telekinetically explode her head. I didn’t mention I’d met Owen on a Habitat for Humanity build. My foray to realize my birthday wish was doing as well as the Titanic, and sharing it aloud could jeopardize it further. I was volunteering, finally contributing to the community, but I’d expected the rough edges of my world to align, too. Like they had for Rachel. But I still worked for cheating men, my father hadn’t found a job, and my love life was beyond pathetic.

Apparently, I had to try harder.

“Okay, okay,” she said, catching her breath. “So...he’s gay. Move on. We’ll go out to a club. I’ll vet any potential cute men.”

If only it were that easy. “I’m all for the clubbing, but my issue is bigger than that. I like this guy. Like, *like him*, like him. We’re working together on a project, and I find myself telling him all sorts of things I never share. He’s nice and fun,

and he's crazy hot. Just...being around him is hard, so I keep him at a certain distance, but I hate the idea of losing him as a friend. I even show up when I know he'll be volunteering, like a glutton for punishment. It's a rock-and-a-hard-place scenario."

Meaning, I'd like to be pinned between a rock and his hard place.

"That's easy. Stop fighting it."

"Did you miss the part where I said he was gay?"

"Of course not. I get to make fun of you for at least a year with that tidbit. What I mean is, stop distancing yourself from him because you're a second from mauling the guy. Embrace the gay. You can shop together and dish about guys. It could be great."

Embrace the gay. *Huh.* I'd been avoiding physical contact with Owen, worried I'd accidentally/on-purpose cop a feel, but this could be liberating, allowing hugs and touches and cheek kisses, knowing it wouldn't go anywhere. Owen didn't seem like the shop-till-you-drop type, but I could get some guy intel. Real conversations about what sex is like for them. Learn some pointers.

He could be the Will to my Grace.

"You might be onto something. Sorry again about your mom."

She avoided the latter comment, and we hung up as Owen stood and stretched. Drool pooled in my mouth. His threadbare jeans emphasized his narrow hips and thick thighs. His ass was a gift from the gods. I continued my creeper staring as he scratched the back of his head, his T-shirt riding up just enough. Flat stomach. A trail of light brown hair. Hip bones. *Unf.*

Heat bloomed between my thighs, and I didn't fight it. If I was going to make this friendship work, I'd have to live with this constant ache or become accustomed to it. Sexy exposure therapy. Surely it would dissipate.

He spotted me and tipped up his chin. His long legs ate up the distance between us, his movements purposeful, focused. Like he was about to lift me up, spin me around, and kiss me senseless. I bit down on my cheek, willing these fantasies to subside.

He stopped in front of me. “Sorry I missed lunch.”

I wiped the corner of my mouth, worried the drool had escaped. “Lucifer was particularly ornery.” Because I was embracing the gay, no longer avoiding sexual jokes or innuendo, I added, “I think he needs to get laid.”

Owen tossed back his head with a hearty laugh. “You’re probably right. Maybe we could hook him up on Match-dot-com.”

I nodded thoughtfully. “His profile would read: ‘I like hairy butts and I cannot lie.’”

“He also enjoys nuts by the mouthful,” he added.

I guess Lucifer was gay, too.

We laughed. We grinned. We shared a moment of levity.

If I didn’t know better, I’d say Owen had a sexy sparkle in his eyes. The kind that led a buckaroo such as himself to go all “giddy-up” and “ride ’em cowboy.” But I was a cow*girl*. Still, this was nice. Easy banter. Jokes. I could even flirt with him, for shits and giggles, without consequences. I wouldn’t have to worry about it leading somewhere. I opened my mouth to test this theory, when I spotted a man approaching Nick.

He was tall and thin, with short red hair. His thick-framed glasses looked familiar. I blinked once. Then again. I leaned forward and squinted until my eyes stung.

No way. No freaking way. It couldn’t be.

The man twisted, taking in the building site, and I smacked my forehead with the heel of my palm. “Holy shit.”

“What?” Owen spun to follow my incredulous stare.

He may not have been in a paper Chucky’s Chicken hat, but fate had just dropped Anton Bickley at my feet. The boy

who'd ridiculed me. The boy who'd caused my claustrophobia. Next, thunderstorms of fire would surely rain down. Or Hammer pants would come back in style. His attention shifted our way, and I gripped the back of Owen's shirt, ducking behind him.

His shoulders shook as he laughed. "Did I miss something?"

He tried to move, but I pressed closer against his back. "I'm hiding."

"I noticed."

"From that guy."

"Which guy?"

"The redhead. I know him."

Even with Anton across the site, being plastered to Owen was heavenly. The soft swells of my breasts met the hard planes of his "erector spinae" muscles. (Last week's crossword clue just got sexier.) He smelled like unadulterated masculinity. Like salt and apples and cedar. I leaned into his rigid spine and inhaled.

Did that moan come from me?

"Who is he?" Owen sounded like he'd swallowed gravel.

"Anton."

"No shit." His body stiffened.

"Yes, shit. And why are we always talking about shits? I need to get out of here."

And figure out what Anton's appearance meant. I still despised what he'd done to me as a teen, but I'd neglected to tell Owen how I'd sought revenge.

Anton had been a relentless bully. The villain had reduced me to cold sweats and nausea every work shift. Still, my innocent prank was anything but. Leaving him a cockroach-filled gift box on my last day should have been amusing. But I'd misjudged how apeshit Anton would go. His freakout

ended with him burning his hand in the deep fryer and shattering his right leg.

I'd learned the hard way that getting revenge didn't feel good. My shame chased me to this day.

Seeing him now was worlds-colliding bad. I was doing better. Volunteering. I should be on my way to earning my wings and fulfilling my birthday resolution. Or was this karma sending me a swift kick in my DKNY-clad ass? Maybe I needed to do more to become a better person, including apologizing to Anton for my mean prank.

Either way, I was unprepared to face my nemesis.

"Come out with me," Owen said, his muscles still coiled tight. "That's why I came over. I thought we could grab an early dinner. Make up for our missed lunch. Have a drink."

I could seriously use that drink, except... "I'm not exactly dressed for it."

"You look great, Ainsley. You always look great," he said softly.

Belly, meet manicured feet.

Even in my construction outfit, I was powerless to his charms. "Okay. Let's take your truck."

Realizing my need to stay incognito, he spun and positioned me in front of him. Not nuts to butt, unfortunately, but his large hands curled around my hips, keeping me shadowed. And horny. But I could do this with him. Have dinner. Drinks. Become besties and figure out how to deal with the Anton Development.

Owen led me to the passenger side of his truck and held open the door. Ever the gentleman. It shouldn't surprise me, considering he grew up watching black-and-white films and dancing with his grandmother, just another dazzling thing about the man. Shaking off his awesomeness, I slid in and buckled up. I studied Anton from my perch. He was talking to Nick, likely asking about volunteering, which meant I could be working closely with him.

My stomach soured. Anton had never apologized to me, and I'd never apologized to him. Last I heard, the burns on his hand had left nasty scars, and he still limped.

Way to go, Ainsley.

Owen slid into his side and turned the ignition. Anton's attention flipped our way. *Crap*. I dove down, my face nearer to Owen's crotch than I'd ever have hoped. To avoid a broken nose, I placed my cheek against his thigh and sighed. He cupped the back of my neck, those calluses as rough and sinful as expected.

His thumb sunk into my hair. "I got you, doll."

Slowly, he accelerated. At light speed, my heart revved.

Lord have mercy. *Doll*.



"It smells divine in here. How have I never been to this place?" Where most Indian restaurants had a cafeteria vibe with buffet offerings, this intimate room—full of soft lighting, gold-and-burgundy walls, and hanging swathes of sheer fabric—was sensual.

"I come here with my brother sometimes. Figured there'd be lots for you to order."

I scanned the vegan options. "Tons. This is amazing."

I sat across from him, eager to gossip and forge our new friendship. Redefine my Owen Time. The second our handsome waiter brought our drinks, I sipped my Riesling, enjoying the view as the man walked away. Our server was a looker. All chiseled and swarthy, his tidy beard and inky eyes reminded me of Aazam. Since Gwen wasn't here to help me deduce and assess a potential crush, I'd have to rely on Owen. Maybe he could assist in sussing out a good catch.

Even someone dateable.

Owen Time was pushing me to rethink my no-relationship motto. I liked getting to know him, sharing pieces of myself

with someone again. Sure, most men were dicks like Thomas Arlington the *third*, who liked to park their cars in other women's garages. My last boyfriend, Brandon, had proven as much. But lately I'd sensed my faith creeping back. My father was devoted to my mom. My favorite client, Felipe, spent countless hours at his law firm, but he made his wife a priority. Jimmy was a winner too; Rachel was the happiest I'd ever seen her.

Putting my heart on the line again was terrifying, but I found myself craving that closeness. With someone like Owen—a man who put me at ease. I mean, I was in a public place, wearing dirty jeans, sneakers, and a T-shirt, and I didn't care. I kind of liked not sitting with perfect posture in a tight dress and heels. The ease of it reminded me of nights eating chips on the couch with my dad.

Before we could discuss my revelation, there was business to attend to. "Anton's for sure volunteering, right? I'm going to end up partnered with him, or something equally as horrifying."

Owen sipped his beer. "If I had to guess, yeah. He was talking to Nick, who organizes that stuff. But I could take care of him, if you want—shove him in a box and ship him to Antarctica. The prick deserves it."

"That's sweet, but I'd have to be deported, too." I went on to confessed my shameful stunt, describing how I'd forced my brother to collect cockroaches, not relenting until the "gift" box was full. I slumped as I admitted Anton's resulting injuries.

Owen scrubbed a hand over his mouth. "I get feeling guilty over that, but the guy had it coming. You also didn't mean to hurt him. And I know this isn't what you want to hear...but maybe Anton turning up is a good thing."

"Good because this is an alternate universe and everything is *opposite* to what I'm actually feeling?"

"No." He nudged my foot with his. "But that would be kind of cool. I was thinking more along the lines of a fateful

push. If you're still upset over what you did, this could be life's way of offering you closure."

I stamped one Converse on the other, twisting uncomfortably. My birthday wish hadn't been made on the fly. I'd been down for a while, frustrated with aspects of my job, feeling badly about myself. But helping my parents took priority over ditching clients. As much pride as the Habitat project provided now, it didn't change my circumstances, and seeing Anton was a reminder that I had more to atone for than my work.

Apologizing to him could help with my resolution. I could rise above the scars *his* bullying had left and be happier with myself, beyond my newest nail job—purple with white flowers, my pinkies dotted with rhinestones.

But the thought of confronting him had me tensing, a mental tally of every mean stunt he'd pulled locking my joints. I'd done one mean thing that had ended horrifically. He'd been the architect of *months* of my torment.

Overwhelmed, I turned my focus to Owen. Another drama I needed to sort. My first stride toward forging our touchy-feely friendship was admitting I knew his boyfriend. I'd avoided the topic, had sidestepped any subjects nearing our love lives. I hadn't wanted to confess I'd had a thing for Emmett, and I also liked pretending Owen was mine. A ridiculous notion.

Since I couldn't plow *him*, it was time to stop playing make believe and plow ahead. While admiring my horny coverings, I said, "I didn't mention it, but I know Emmett."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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Ten-letter word for a small elevator used to move objects between floors.

*Or* the asshole who hits on your dinner date.

D U M B W A I T E R

OWEN

Visions of my brother sharing humiliating childhood stories with Ainsley flooded my mind. I plunked my glass down harder than intended. “What do you mean, you know Emmett?”

“I saw him a few weeks back, when he stopped by the build. I kind of hid my face, so I don’t think he recognized me. I was embarrassed.” Even now, she twirled a lock of blond hair around her finger, avoiding eye contact.

“How exactly do you know him?”

She crossed her legs and bounced her foot. I could feel her movements more than see much under the white tablecloth, but our calves brushed. Even through our jeans, a spark of awareness snapped up my thighs. Like it had when she’d plastered herself to my back earlier. I’d nearly growled when she’d pressed her cheek to my thigh in my car. If I didn’t get us naked soon, that spark would ignite and burn me whole. Tamping down the urge to drag her onto my lap, I waited her out.

She wasn't quick to answer. She flipped her fork in circles. She rolled her eyes as though annoyed with herself. "Thing is, I had a crush on him."

"On Emmett?" She nodded, a sweet blush dusting her cheeks. I'd have laughed, but she looked ready to crawl under the table. "How'd you even meet him?"

"At the gym. I work out with a couple friends there, and I'd seen him around. I mean, he's easy on the eyes, but he wasn't interested, obviously."

I didn't question that. Hearing she'd been into him irked me a bit, but it explained her mixed signals. Must be awkward to be interested in my brother, find out he's gay, then meet me. "You're not the first woman to fall for him, if it makes you feel better. I bet he got a kick out of it."

"Something like that. Anyway, I thought you should know. I enjoy spending time with you, and I didn't want it to make things weird with us."

Did that mean there was an us? I really hoped it meant there was an us. Either way, as new as I was to dating, talking about her feelings for my brother probably wasn't high on any win-the-girl checklist. "Thanks for telling me, but it's no big deal. And I like spending time with you, too."

"Yeah?" she asked, almost skeptical.

I stared into her blue eyes, losing a bit of myself each time they beamed me in. "Yeah," I said, my voice hoarse. The moment lingered. *Something* lingered. Until she looked down sharply, breaking the intensity.

I scanned the menu. "You want to share stuff or order on our own?"

"Share," she said, without looking up.

Sharing it was.

Two drinks and a stomach full of Indian food later, we both leaned forward, elbows on the table. Nana would flick my ear if she saw my poor table manners, but the spices and conversation had me warm and hazy. Ainsley had me hazy.

“What would be your worst way to die?” she asked between sips of water. “Like, your most terrifying option.”

“Zombie bite to the nuts.”

She snorted out a stream of liquid, then slapped a hand over her face. It only made her cuter. “I can’t believe I did that.”

“Too bad I didn’t have my phone out. I could have videoed it.” Come to think of it, she hadn’t touched her phone, either. Our conversation had been effortless, jokes and silly topics thrown between us. And there had been touching. Subtle brushes of her fingers on my wrist as she talked. My blood vessels swelled with each connection, her bright mood making my blood sing. Whatever barrier she’d thrust between us had toppled.

“Seriously though,” she said. “Zombie bite to the nuts? Why?”

“If you’d ever been kicked in the nuts, you’d understand.” I reached down and shifted my jeans at the agonizing thought. Ainsley’s gaze followed my movements. The heat in her eyes had me adjusting for other reasons.

“Men have low pain thresholds. It can’t hurt that badly.”

“You have no idea.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You’d probably skip a week of work for period cramps.”

The one and only time I’d had a solid shot to the nuts had involved a soccer cleat, a missed kick, and me rolling on the ground. “If period cramps feel like being punched in the gut with Thor’s hammer, followed by simultaneously wanting to puke and shit yourself, then yeah, you’re probably right. I’d take a sick day.”

“Baby,” she mumbled.

“What about you? Worst way to die.”

She tore off a piece of naan bread, scooped the last of our chana masala, and hummed as she swallowed. “If we’re talking fictional, then molten gold poured over my head.”

I froze mid-sip of my beer. “As in *Game of Thrones*?”

“Obviously.”

“I didn’t peg you for a fantasy lover.”

“I have eclectic taste in music and TV. My dad got me into fantasy stuff, and Khal Drogo boiling Viserys Targaryen’s brain to give him his ‘gold crown’ was gruesomely awesome. Bad way to go.”

She played word games, loved to hike, watched violent fantasy shows, her raspy voice exuded sex, and she looked like she walked off the set of *Some Like it Hot*. I couldn’t have dreamed up this woman. “And if we’re talking real life?”

She shuddered. “Death by submarine.”

“Meaning a submarine falling on you, or dying in a submarine?”

She glowered at my teasing. “Dying *in* a submarine, smartass. Walking into one would give me an instant heart attack.”

“You have issues with confined spaces?”

“I’m a tad claustrophobic. Tend to hyperventilate and thrash widely when boxed in. It isn’t pretty.”

Even now, her cheeks paled. The notion of her stressed and anxious did strange things to my chest. It had me wanting to run my thumb between her eyes, erase the crease settling there. “Do subways bother you?”

“I avoid them.”

“Elevators?”

“I get sweaty.”

Images of a flushed and dewy Ainsley flipped through my mind. Her curvy body under me. Over me. Locked in my arms. “Must make getting around tough.”

“I deal with it. It just gets uncomfortable at times.”

Like sitting across from her and not leaning over to taste her pulse point. A crumb from the naan clung to the edge of

her mouth. Needing to touch her, I reached to brush it off. The tip of my finger dragged by her lips. Those plump, bee-stung lips. Her breasts rose on an inhalation, my nearness affecting her as much as it was me. My cock grew heavy, my body buzzing with desire. The urge to get our check and get gone was potent, but chatting with her was fun, too. Slowly, I sat back.

She seemed to bite the inside of her cheek, then she sent me a wicked grin. “Can I ask you a...” She chewed her cheek some more. “A personal question?”

I leaned into my chair, tipping onto its back legs. “Anything.”

“What’s sex really like for a guy?”

I dropped forward, and my chair *thunked* on the tile floor. That question was unexpected. Unexpected but intriguing. I liked it. Liked that Ainsley wanted to up the flirting a notch. “I need more specifics before I answer.”

“Just...” Lilted Indian music drifted through the half-filled room. Ainsley swayed to the beat. “Is every orgasm the same? I mean, for girls it’s different. Oral versus *sex sex*. Mood. Attraction. All those things affect how it feels. But guys, you know, just *come*. So, does it feel the same each time, or does it change?”

Jesus H. Christ. If I was hard before, I was iron now, thankfully covered by the tablecloth. She must have realized what she was doing to me. Must have been intent on killing me one sex-fuelled, husky word at a time. Delaying this gratification would make touching her that much sweeter. “It’s always good.” My voice was scratchy, and I cleared my throat. “Always blinds me. But some orgasms last longer, rock you harder, and with the right person, it’s more intense.” I held her gaze until she looked away. Her pale cheeks burned pink.

I had no doubt sex with Ainsley would blow my mind.

She dragged her teeth over her bottom lip and lowered her voice. “What about head? What’s, like, really hot? What takes a blowjob from good to oh-my-fucking-God?”

My blood wasn't just singing now. It was roaring. It was demanding me to grab Ainsley, flip her over my shoulder, and carry her home to show her exactly what I liked, then spend the rest of the evening worshipping her curves. Every glorious dip and swell. I tugged at my shirt's neckline and sipped my water, never breaking eye contact.

"You want to know what I like?"

"I want to know what *men* like."

So this was a game. A hypothetical way to make me crazy. Getting her home tonight was going to be some kind of fun. "I can't speak for all men, but I love a nice, long lick. Teasing. Having my shaft and balls played with."

Her eyelids drooped and her lips parted. She made a breathy grunt, a sound she often released around me. Apparently Ainsley liked a dirty talker, and this extended foreplay was doing it for me. Getting me hotter than I ever remembered being. As soon as I told her all the ways I'd "theoretically" love her to suck me off, we'd be flipping this conversation onto her.

She nodded, expectant, waiting for me to go on. Practically panting for it.

Leaning closer, I obliged. "I like attention on the tip. A bit of teeth is nice, but not too much."

She whimpered.

"Also hands," I said, deepening my voice. "I like a firm grip. Lots of suction makes everything nice and tight. Wet and warm. Really love when I can watch, too."

Her reply: "I think I just came."

I barked out a laugh, unsure how I found this girl, but thanked my lucky stars her killer heels had sent her flying into my arms. I'd never had this much fun flirting and hanging out. Never experienced arousal so thick my skin itched. "You worried about your skills? Is that what this is about?"

She was glowing and nothing short of beautiful, her sultry smile sending an arrow through my heart. "I love sex." There

was no hint of apology or embarrassment in her tone. “I love being with men and knowing what I like. I also love giving head. Some women find it degrading or, I don’t know, *dirty*... but it makes me feel powerful. In control. I love watching a man’s legs shake as he unravels, because of me. So, since we’re friends, I figured this was a great opportunity. Like one of those ‘The More You Know’ public-service announcements. You’re helping me do better.” She shrugged a shoulder, like it was nothing.

Like she wasn’t torturing me.

Forget getting her home. I was a second from fucking her perfect mouth right here and now. My dick pulsed, the room suddenly stifling. Soon I’d be jacking off under the table. “What do you say we get out of here?”

But she frowned. “You okay? You look flushed. Was it the food?”

Ainsley was playing with fire now. Toying with me. I’d bought condoms this morning, my first time in years. I’d felt like a teenager again, nervous and excited to ask her out, hoping I’d be making love to her soon. The nerves were gone. All that was left was raging desire. It was time to share how I planned to ravage *her* in the near future. Get her wet and ready for me. “Since you want to talk about oral sex—”

“Can I offer you any dessert?” our waiter asked.

Great fucking timing, dude. “Just the check.”

Ainsley was all the dessert I needed, and she was eyeing me like she wanted a bite. Until her attention flicked to our audience.

She licked lips and flipped her hair over her shoulder. “I could be tempted.”

*Excuse me?* Was that a seductive note purring in her voice? She was considering him now, her gaze taking in the man’s physique. My confusion grew by the second. My fingers flexed, a second from locking around the asshole’s neck.

Our waiter snuck a glance at me, then focused on Ainsley. “We pride ourselves on our variety here. Lots to offer.” He

winked.

Ainsley pushed out her breasts. “I like the sound of that.”

What in the ever loving fuck? The asshole was flirting with her, and she was playing along. No. Not playing along. She was instigating. Could be she was into kinky sex. Maybe she wanted a threesome with this joker. She knew Emmett was gay, probably figured I leaned that way, too. Maybe she’d hoped I was bi. As a teen, I’d debated the idea of being with men. Contemplated my brother’s sexuality and wondered what it would be like. I even kissed a guy once. It never did anything for me, and threesomes weren’t my bag. I liked being with a woman, and I didn’t like to share.

Seeing this side of Ainsley was a bucket of ice water on my nuts.

Our server left to get dessert menus, and Ainsley bounced on her seat. “He’s cute, don’t you think?”

I guess things *could* get worse. “Not my type.”

She swatted the air, unconcerned by my irate sarcasm. “Obviously. What about for me? I mean, his beard is hot and he has a bit of an accent. English, maybe? Should I ask him out?”

I crossed my arms, part fuming and *all* sexually frustrated. If she wasn’t after a threesome, then what? More games? More hot and cold? Or maybe I’d been right from the start—she wasn’t into me. She seriously just wanted to be friends. If that was the case, then fine. I liked her. She was fun to be with and easy to talk to, but right now I was riled up and needed space. If I confronted her and asked her outright, I’d wind up saying something rude for leading me on. Better to end this night without putting my bruised ego on display.

“You were right before,” I said, forcing my voice steady, my face placid. “I’m not feeling great. Best if we go.”

She fussed over me for a beat, then proceeded to give our waiter her number as we paid. I sat there like a schmuck, swallowing my anger. Still burning with desire for a woman who wasn’t interested in me. She was the first person I’d

connected with since leaving Tessa, and my chest felt like it had been steamrolled. Disappointment sat heavy in my gut.

I drove her to her car, barely a word spoken between us; my frustration didn't leave much room for conversation. She snuck furtive glances my way, but I couldn't speak. Wouldn't. I'd fallen for Ainsley. Beyond the attraction, I'd started imagining us eating breakfast in bed and swimming in the ocean. Doing dishes. Some people found day-to-day life mundane. I reveled in the idea of walking down a grocery aisle, teasing my girl, stealing kisses. I'd actually wondered if Ainsley was my missing piece of glass.

That dream would be a tough bubble to break.

Once I accepted she wasn't interested in me, I'd apologize. When I was sure I wouldn't say something hurtful, I'd explain. For now I needed to lick my wounds.

## CHAPTER NINE

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Four-letter word for the part of a truck's crane used to hoist heavy materials.

*Or* the sound your heart makes when you realize your crush is straight.

B O O M

AINSLEY

Although I couldn't afford college and had missed the wild frat parties that accompanied higher learning, I'd come a long way since my teen years. I now ran my own business. I was still close with my parents. I'd since met Gwen and Rachel, two best friends who would take a bullet for me. I'd also found redemption with my pink tool belt.

Unfortunately, my life still felt like it was spiraling down a storm drain.

The waiter I'd met while hanging out with Owen hadn't wasted time asking me out. We'd met for drinks and talked about his burgeoning acting career and our shared love of *Game of Thrones* (aka: my love of Jon Snow), while a trio performed White Stripe covers, but it was work. *Effort*. Conversation would wane then disappear, awkward smiles traded, until we'd stumble back on track. He'd also use any excuse to brush his fingers against my arm. His flirting should

have had my heart fluttering, but there wasn't so much as a limp flicker.

Nothing like my dinner with Owen.

I'd relived those details the past five days. The memory of him describing his ideal BJ still reduced me to hot flashes, and the way we'd laughed and joked had been as comfortable as chatting with Gwen or Rachel. Except it was *nothing* like chatting with Gwen or Rachel. With them, I didn't zone out, fantasizing about us kissing frantically. Or groping. Or groaning. Or fucking our brains out. I loved my friends, but I was all about the cock.

And so was Owen.

Which was fine. It really was. I was determined to ignore my raging attraction to the man and maintain our friendship, *if* he didn't currently hate me. I'd had a pit in my stomach since my dinner with him. Maybe I shouldn't have broached our sexual conversation. Maybe I'd crossed a line. All I knew was he'd shut down afterward, and his cold shoulder left me more confused than ever.

Then came my father's call this morning. Their house had mold. A dent in the bedroom wall revealed rotting wood and unhealthy spores. It had to be fixed. It would cost money. He'd refused my offer to cover it, so I suggested I find someone through the build to help out. Total lie. I would hire someone, pay them, and tell Dad it was pro bono. If it meant keeping his dignity intact, a little fib wouldn't hurt. It also meant putting any clothing purchases on hold for a while.

As pleased as I was to be volunteering in the community, my parents were sinking farther in debt, not digging themselves out. The Anton Bickley situation was a whole other ball of wax likely to plow over me. I hadn't seen him since that first sighting. I still wasn't sure what I'd do if he turned up. With my stress rising, I could have thrown in the towel and admitted bettering myself wouldn't alter my life in any grand way.

Instead I upped my game.

I found myself in my favorite client's office, asking Felipe to donate the stereos and TVs for the Habitat build. My motto: If at first you don't succeed, find a way to outdo all do-gooders. (Cue "Eye of the Tiger.") Following our twenty-minute meeting, I left Felipe's office in brighter spirits. The gold Jimmy Choos I'd scored at a recent sale certainly helped matters, but philanthropy was some high-level stimulant.

I strutted out the door like I was walking a Fashion Week runway, positive that things were looking up. Felipe's assistant, Cindy, was at her desk. Normally I'd gossip with her, bragging how Felipe had agreed to my request with gusto, but Cindy's dark eyes flitted about. She waved me over in a flurry of aggressive hand gestures.

*Not* her usual behavior.

If those who took stress in stride were considered "cool as a cucumber," Cindy was as chill as a margarita *on ice*. She was shorter than me, a petite Chinese woman with blunt bangs and bobbed hair. My first few months working for Felipe, she'd been all business with me, until we ran into each other at a club. Give Cindy a few shots of tequila, and the girl ruled a dance floor.

I hurried over and leaned close. "What's up?"

"You may have a problem." She lifted the small box I'd left on her desk while in Felipe's office. "Is this for Dean's wife or his mistress?"

By "this," she meant the gold Tiffany's bracelet with the hanging heart charm. The one I'd purchased on behalf of my client, Dean Linkletter, who worked down the hall. His office was beside Thomas Arlington the *third's*. A despicable corridor of cheating men.

"Wife," I said.

"Shit."

"Crap."

"*Shhh*."

I didn't know why we were cursing or Cindy was shushing me, but unease prickled my neck. "Spill the beans."

"Hank stepped away from reception, and the new girl, Letisha, let the mistress through, even though his wife is meeting him for lunch in twenty minutes." She snarled in disgust at this faux pas. "Dean's assistant messaged me that he's about to have an aneurism."

"Crap," I said again, *with feeling*.

If it weren't for Cindy, I'd have waltzed into the douchebag's office, brandishing the engraved gift for his wife in front of the mistress, who believed he was on the verge of a divorce. A misstep that would have damaged my business. I had five clients at this firm, each man sleazier than the next, Felipe aside. All were cutthroat attorneys who ate personal shoppers like me for breakfast and wielded their financial power like a khopesh. (Seven-letter word for an Egyptian sickle-sword.) If it got out that my lack of discretion—my fault or not—had brought ruin upon a man's personal life, I'd be toast.

I lowered my voice. "How long has she been in there?"

"Too long. He'll have her out before Mrs. Linkletter arrives. You can loiter here."

I forced a stiff smile and positioned myself near an abstract painting. My attempt to camouflage with the décor was unsuccessful. The gray-on-gray hallway and glassed-in offices exuded strength and dignity, two qualities seeping out of me by the nanosecond. Guilt weighed on my conscience. Culpability thickened my throat.

I was part of this deceit. Not the ringleader, but I eased the sting of Dean's betrayals with special gifts, false promises of devotion toward the mistress and his wife.

Belly roiling, I pulled out my phone and focused on my crossword app:

*Seven-letter word for a disloyal person.*

I'm pretty sure the answer was: A-I-N-S-L-E-Y, not *traitor*.

Another reminder of how far off I was from truly fulfilling my resolution. I may have been working at a Habitat build and had asked Felipe for donations, but there was no avoiding my continued contribution to the world's cesspool. Rachel's life hadn't turned around overnight. She quit her job right away, but things hadn't fallen into place until she'd made tough choices, enrolling in school months later. *That's* when her life had shot from "fine" to ticker-tape parade.

Which meant I needed to do more. Work harder. Find a way to shed my scaly clients in favor of the Felipes of the world. Not just for my resolution. Because this feeling, like raw sewage churned in my gut, didn't hold a candle to the swoopiness volunteering instilled. Leaving my folks to scrounge for mortgage payments on their own wasn't optional. My brother worked hard selling cars, but it didn't afford him enough to chip in.

I would make changes in my job. They just wouldn't happen quickly.

So lost in thought, I hadn't noticed the furious clickety-clack of stilettos or Cindy's mumbled, "Fucking Christ," until it was too late. I glanced up to find myself in the middle of a showdown. The mistress sauntered down the hall to my left... and Mrs. Linkletter strutted toward her on my right. Their collision was a matter of time, especially with the determination on the mistress's face.

Fucking Christ was right.

Sally Linkletter looked like a stereotypical Sally: curly blond hair, thin face, pointed features. Proper. Innocent. We'd met a handful of times, and she'd always been nice to me. The mistress was her polar opposite, all bright red lips and ombre-dyed hair, talons for nails. I plastered myself against the wall as Sally's attention flickered to me, her sweet smile the exact opposite of what her expression should be.

Oh God.

The mistress marched straight for her. "He's leaving you. He promised me he's ending it. So get ready for a divorce, because he loves *me*."

She shouldered past Sally, the angry *clack, clack, clack* of her heels as damaging as a spray of bullets. Mrs. Linkletter pressed her hand over her heart, caving forward. Dean peeled out of his office. He enveloped his wife, soothing her, going on about a crazy client who had it in for him. Somehow he guided her behind closed doors, not before her first tear slipped out.

My phone shook in my hands.

I'd been Sally once—duped, deceived, *humiliated*. Except my mortifying revelation had involved more show than tell.

Brandon and I had talked about moving in together, but I'd held out. The permanence of it was a big deal, and I wanted to be sure. Then he seemed to hesitate, too. In hindsight, I think I'd done it out of insecurity. I'd sensed him slipping away. Either way, I showed up at his place with my terminated lease. I'd stewed over it for weeks and decided Brandon was it for me. That moving in together would bring us closer. That we'd get married and have kids and ride off into the sunset.

On that particular rainy day, I'd also decided to use his spare key and surprise him wearing nothing but a white bustier, thong, and garters. I'd dropped my trench coat at the front door and walked toward his bedroom, where I'd planned to strike a sexy pose for when he came home.

My first clue my world was about to cave in was the grunting coming from behind his door. His “Yeah, baby, yeah” was horrifyingly familiar, but it was the feminine “God, yes, Brandon” that turned my knees to slush.

Shaking, I nudged his door open...and froze. I watched the two of them *fucking*, unable to look away. My terminated lease shook in my fisted hand, my lingerie pure humiliation. He was on top, each thrust a nail hammered in my heart. My throat constricted. My eyes burned. Then I screamed. Nothing specific, just an ear-splitting shriek.

Mortified, I'd grabbed my coat and tore out of the place. The second I hit the street, tears streaked my cheeks thicker than the rain plastering my hair. My stomach curled in on itself. I convulsed in shivery spasms, my skimpy attire barely

covered by my trench coat. I wanted to disappear. Dissolve into the puddles collecting at my feet.

Now I ached for Sally, could feel the sting of disgrace that had seeped into my skin when in her position, and yet here I was, at the center of someone else's emotional hurricane.

If my parents weren't in the picture, I'd march into Dean's office and toss his wife's gift at his nuts. Cease being a pawn in this despicable game. He'd had me engrave Sally's bracelet with the word *Forever*. All to keep his public life intact. (Insert devil emoji here.) He placated the mistress with lies. She'd knowingly fallen for a married man. Now Sally knew the extent of his deception, unless she chose to accept his lies.

She might realize I'd helped him.

"Why don't I drop this off for you?" Cindy removed the gift from my clenched hand. The white box was now dented. "I'll give it to him when she leaves, tell him you couldn't wait."

I managed a few unsteady breaths. "I'd appreciate it."

Cindy really was a top-notch assistant.



Two hours into volunteering the next day, I was still off my game. The Mistress Encounter had undermined my concentration, and I kept expecting Anton to show up.

Then there was the Owen Issue. Upon seeing him this morning, he'd offered me nothing but a polite wave. He didn't make a move to stop and chat, when all I wanted was to confide in him. Talk through my financial options and ways I could build my client list, while shedding the diabolical assholes currently crowding my roster. I could have called Gwen or Ainsley, but Owen used to work in finance. He had experience.

It was also more than that.

He listened when I spoke, his replies always thoughtful and soothing. I could also use a hug from his gravity-defying arms. Friends could hug, after all. Friends could offer support. If I wanted to salvage things, I'd best start by apologizing for my forwardness at dinner.

Lunch was in an hour, but I couldn't wait. As soon as he came out of the house he'd been working in, I bee-lined for him. "How goes the dry walling?"

He wiped his hands on his jeans, leaving behind white finger streaks. "Good."

God, one word? He didn't ask me what I'd been slaving over or joke with me about the new volunteer with the misspelled tattoo. (Knowledge is Power.) I'd really messed things up. Not as badly as that tattoo, but Owen's distance worsened my already rising anxiety.

A muscle in his jaw ticked. He shifted his attention to the clouds blowing across the blue sky. Like he was frustrated. Like he couldn't look at me. He dragged his same hand through his thick hair, leaving a white smudge on his forehead. It was sweet, seeing a blemish on his handsome face. Being the Good Samaritan I was, I pressed to my tiptoes and swiped my thumb across the white streak, bringing us closer than intended. My breasts nearly grazed his wide chest, my senses filling with his intoxicating smell, an inhale I shouldn't have stolen.

*Bad Ainsley.*

Before I could snatch my arm away, Owen clasped my wrist. "What are you doing?"

He almost sounded angry, and I bit my lip, ashamed I'd made things weird again. There was no sweeping my behavior under the carpet. Brutal honesty was the only thing that would fix this mess. It would embarrass the crap out of me, but I'd made my bed.

Time to get cozy in it.

He still had my wrist in his hand. When I moved, he startled, releasing me.

I tucked my hands into my front pockets. “I’m sorry about the other night. It’s just...” I looked down, unable to meet his eyes. Here comes the crazy. “I’ve never had a gay friend before, and I’m kind of attracted to you, like *way* more than I was with Emmett. I don’t even know what that says about me. Anyway, it was tough for me, spending time together. But I like you, like really enjoy hanging out. So I thought, because I’m clearly an idiot, talking about sex and guys, and making those non-taboo subjects, was smart. That I’d get over my feelings for you. Turns out I made things worse.”

My heart pounded an unsteady rhythm as I studied Owen’s work boots, big and rugged like him. Unmoving, like him. Unable to handle his silence, I finally looked up. The fire in his eyes was unexpected. And odd. It was the kind of heat I’d expect from a lover, a person about to tear my clothes from my body. *God*. How did he expect me to stay friends with him when he looked at me like that?

“You think I’m gay?” was all he said.

I blinked a thousand and one times, and my heart raced faster. Was that disbelief in his tone? “Are you telling me you’re *not*?”

And oh, that fire in his eyes sparked, his pupils blowing wide with intent. “I am not gay.”

My life was not this lucky. Surely I had heard him wrong. I shook my head and dug a finger in my ear. “Sorry. I thought it sounded like you said you’re *not* gay.”

His right hand shot out, gripping my hip, spikes of fire zinging from each point of contact. “I am *not* gay.”

I *was* having trouble breathing.

Maybe I’d harnessed some magical powers. Had somehow embodied Criss Angel or Hermione Granger, or that geeky kid from *Weird Science* (minus the tacky eighties outfits) and had conjured my ideal man with nothing but a pink hammer, orange hardhat, and good intentions.

Blinking was no longer an option. “But I saw you with Emmett. He grabbed your ass.”

“You saw me with my *brother*. He thinks he’s being funny with the ass grab, but that explains a lot. I also might have to kill him.”

My pulse surged, my veins likely to burst from the rush of blood. “So, just to be clear, you’re not gay.”

Chuckling now, he flexed each finger on my hip, digging in deeper. “I’m not gay, Ainsley. I’ve been trying to figure out why the hell you’d go out with me and pick up another man on *our* date.”

He wasn’t gay. My gaydar wasn’t broken, and by the sexy smolder aimed my way, I’d say my attraction wasn’t one-sided. His thumb pressed under my hipbone, moving in a tortuous rhythm. Someone called his name, but neither of us flinched. We stared at each other, locked in some sort of carnal staring game. My eyeballs were getting a serious workout.

He stepped so close his belt buckle caught on my T-shirt. “I’m going to fucking ravage you.”

A throb of want pulsed between my thighs. “I’m going to fuck you so hard the sheets will catch fire.”

“I want to taste every inch of you.”

“I want you to come all over me.”

A pained sound tore from the back of his throat, and my body temperature shot to scorching. I was as wet as I’ve ever been, and I had no doubt if I gripped the thickening line in his jeans I’d find his cock was harder than the concrete footings.

“Owen! Need you inside.” Nick’s bellow was a harsh reminder we were at a busy worksite. Not alone. Nowhere we could unleash this woolly mammoth sexual tension.

Still, we didn’t move. We breathed, I think. Once or twice.

Then Owen said, “Lunch.” One gravelly syllable.

He didn’t need to say more. Lunch was in one hour. Although I had an avocado, white bean, and strawberry salad waiting in my car, I’d wager the only thing I’d be eating in fifty-eight minutes was Owen. I was ready to inhale this man.

“Lunch.” My confirming syllable was pure whimper.

His hand dropped from my hip. We turned at the same time. Moved our feet in time, too. Suddenly, everything was in sync. The molecules between us vibrated—dusty particles floating on a cloud of lust.

We stopped at the entrance to the house, and he clutched the doorjamb. The marionette I’d become, I stopped, too. Waiting. Watching. Fascinated I’d soon be free to touch and taste my fill. His fingers turned white from gripping the wood. Or possibly from not gripping me. A dusting of hair spanned between his knuckles. I wanted to drag my nose over that blond fur, pinch the skin between each thick finger, nibble on his wrist bones.

Fifty-seven minutes and counting.

His brown eyes were usually rich with honeyed swirls lighting sections. Like Aazam’s sixty-percent chocolate streaked with salted caramel. The dark brown stunners lasering into me now were nearing seventy-five percent, darker and more sinful.

What would it take to get them to a raw one-hundred percent?

I eyed the bulge striking a sharp angle behind his zipper. “Make sure not to hammer anything important.”

He groaned, and the bulge twitched. We went about our work.

Seventeen minutes later, he eye-fucked me for thirty-eight seconds.

At the twenty-nine minute mark, I sucked a cut on my finger just for him.

Minute forty-one found us brushing horny elbows. I nearly came.

The last five minutes were the worst. My hardhat felt two sizes too small, my breasts two sizes too big. The earth’s atmosphere had lost nine-tenths of its oxygen, and my tool belt weighed as much as the heavy ache between my thighs.

Everything felt swollen. My T-shirt and skinny jeans would surely need to be cut off.

Then his large hand engulfed mine.

The volunteers had begun drifting off the site, heading for a quick burger or bagged lunch. Owen's fingers threading between mine promised more.

He tugged me forward, but I yanked him back. "Hardhat."

Sentences were no longer an option.

His eyes darkened to eight-five percent and a low growl rumbled from his chest, like he was pissed off. I felt the same. Angry to delay this for another millisecond.

We pried our hands apart for the time it took for us to leave our hardhats in the onsite tent and dump our tool belts in his truck. Then my small hand was enveloped by his again as we walked purposefully to our park. His strides were long. My short legs did small hop-steps to keep up. His grip tightened, nearly cutting off my circulation, and I unleashed a nervous-excited-when-did-this-become-my-life cackle.

Things were going to get fun fast.

Owen dragged me over the curb, the sprawling grass doing some sort of swaying tantric dance, the leaves above singing a chorus of "Let's Get it On." The pavement behind us swallowed the world. When we skirted our picnic table, he swung me around until my back hit our white ash tree.

He stared down at me, his eyes now at ninety-five percent. "You're so damn beautiful."

"Your hotness is at a nuclear level."

"Your eyes remind me of the beach."

"Yours are sinful chocolate."

"If you only knew how badly I want you."

Man, oh, man. "If you only knew how many times I came with your face burning the backs of my eyelids."

His hips jutted forward. Full lips parted, he cupped my cheeks and used his powerful quadriceps to press my thighs to the rough bark. Whatever sexy dance the grass was doing tickled along my fingers until I was running them up and down his sides. I was verging on delirious. “Do I get to kiss you now, sinful chocolate boy?”

He rolled his hips, and his erection ground against my belly. “Doll, you’re about to get devoured.”

## CHAPTER TEN

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Eleven letters describing the amount of heat removed to keep a space cool.

*Or* when your nuts ice over because you lie to the woman you're falling for.

C O O L I N G L O A D

OWEN

My jeans pinched around my cock, not an inch of space between Ainsley's sensual body and mine, but I needed more. Needed her honeyed hair unfurled over my sheets, her clothes strewn across my floor. Her skin shifting against mine. That perfection would have to wait.

Heart hammering in my throat, I wrapped my hands around the soft give of her waist and captured her lips in a crushing kiss. When I'd imagined kissing Ainsley in the past, it was slow and deep with little bites and licks snuck in. But her revelation of my sexuality and my growing need the past hour had shaken me to the point of explosion.

And I nearly did that. Almost came in my jeans. Tongues sliding hungrily, we kissed and moaned and groped while trying to shrink the nonexistent space between us. Her lips were full and soft, her body lush and yielding. I was all hard lines and painfully aroused. My balls had never been so tight,

heat rushing my cock in fierce waves. My chest was the worst, a swirl of emotion cresting through me.

Ainsley wanted me. She'd been as frustrated as I had the past weeks, feeling our connection but not believing it was real. Dammit, it was real. It was wet mouths and breathy groans as our teeth bumped. Her fingers dug into my straining back muscles, her calf sliding around mine as if it could draw us closer. My knuckles chafed against the jagged bark.

A shriek from the playground had me jumping back, the outside world invading. Breathing hard, we watched a couple kids chase each other and giggle in an endless game of tag.

Ainsley unmolded herself from the tree and stood in front of me. She slipped her hands under the bottom of my T-shirt, letting her fingers trace my abs and the tops of my hipbones. "Where were we?"

I hissed out a strangled breath, each light brush of her fingers driving me insane. "You were throwing yourself at me."

She snickered, a sexy rasp sizzling with want. "Consider me your personal blanket."

Wrapping myself up in this woman sounded damn good. Her fingers continued stroking my stomach—up, down, side to side. My cock strained against my jeans, every muscle from my cheeks to my calves tensing. A blast of fire shot up my thighs. I clenched my jaw harder and flexed my quads, nearly spraining a muscle. It was time to slow things down. Savor the beauty before me. Not let things get out of hand.

Guiding her so the tree blocked us from the playground, I soaked her in. I touched her eyebrow, traced the smooth arch. She blinked, and her long lashes skimmed my palm. I felt that soft brush everywhere. I wanted to map every inch of her skin. I read her like braille instead, memorizing the curve of her cheek, the cupid's bow of her lips, the tiny divot under her chin.

She flattened her hands on my stomach and shuddered. "Are we dreaming?"

“If we are, I’d rather not wake up.” Except the absurdity of our misunderstanding had me chuckling. “Can’t believe you thought I was gay.”

“Can’t believe you’re not kissing me right now.”

“Demanding.”

“More like undersexed.”

Ainsley and her bluntness. But like her, I still couldn’t fathom that we were standing here, her hands under my shirt, mine on her gorgeous face. The air snapping between us. We were like Ellie and Peter in *It Happened One Night*, but instead of a spoiled rich girl, I’d found myself a vegan fashionista with a love of crossword puzzles who’d upended my life. I looped my finger through the pink elastic holding up her hair, dragged it out, and tossed it on the ground.

A dangerous smirk lit her face. “I liked that accessory.”

“You’ll like my hands in your hair better.” Not giving her time to reply, I threaded my fingers through the thick, golden layers, caressing her scalp and giving the strands a gentle tug.

She groaned. “I definitely like that better, but you’re still not kissing me.”

A travesty in need of reform. Noses brushing, I took my time. Barely grazed my lips over hers, mimicking the movement of her lazy fingers—up, down, side to side. I licked the seam of her lips, coaxing them open for me. Languidly, I twirled my tongue around hers, sucked on her bottom lip, teasing us both with light nips. Like I’d fantasized doing. We traded heady moans. Maybe traded promises, too.

We’d spent the past six weeks talking and laughing, both hoping for more. Could be this was the start of something amazing.

Her hands sketched a path over my ribs and up my back, her strokes quickening. Our kiss deepened—wetter, hotter, more tongue and teeth. But we weren’t alone. I couldn’t pop the top button of her jeans and work my fingers into her panties. I couldn’t hoist her legs around my waist.

I kissed her softly on the corner of her mouth. “We should come up for air.”

Cheeks flushed, she blinked before focusing on me. “Sorry, did you say something?”

Honest to God, this woman’s unabashed humor. Every word out of her mouth had me falling harder. “You distracted?”

“I’m not sure I can feel my lips.”

I ran my thumb over those bee-stung beauties. “They feel nice to me.”

She tried to bite me. “What’s this about air?”

Guess she was listening after all. “Unless you want to get arrested for indecent exposure, we need to take a break.”

She removed her hands from under my shirt, then proceeded to smooth the cotton over my abdomen. “Can I touch you over your clothes? Because your body is ridiculous. I mean, I’ve pictured it a lot, like *a lot*, but you don’t have an ounce of body fat anywhere.”

Laughing again, I sat on the prickly grass and pulled her between my legs—my back against the rough tree trunk, her spine rounding into my chest. Our own slice of heaven. “When we’re alone, you can touch me all you want, wherever you want. The ravaging I promised will happen. But tell me more about you picturing us naked.”

“Aren’t we supposed to be cooling things down?”

Her hair blew into my face, and I inhaled her scent. *Chocolate-dipped vanilla ice cream*. “Good point. How about telling me why you seemed so sad this morning.” I’d watched her when she’d arrived, couldn’t miss the frown lines sunk into her brow, her uncharacteristic bleakness. Still confused and irked with her behavior, all I’d mustered was a curt wave. Felt like an ass for it.

Turning sideways, she planted her feet on the outside of my thigh, wrapping her arms around her bent knees. “It’s a few things.”

I kissed her temple. Because I could. “I’m a good listener.”

“You are.” She pulled one of my hands into her grasp, traced the dips and curves of my knuckles. Ran her nails over the sparse hairs. I liked the simplicity of it. Ainsley plucking at my skin and calluses.

With my free hand around the back of her shoulders, I pulled her closer and nosed her ear. “Tell me.”

Her shoulder pressed into my chest. “I want to fire ninety percent of my clients, but my folks have unexpected house expenses on top of their usual struggles, so I might be stuck working for assholes for the rest of my life.”

I knew her clients were lawyers and had my own experience with that ego-driven crowd. “Let me guess, they toss their weight around and condescend to you.”

Chewing her lip, she lined up our hands, bottoms of our palms even, like she was measuring me. “Attitude I can handle. These men are lying cheats. Most have mistresses.”

My heart rate sped. Cheating meant they were looking for women to use and discard. Meant they might be hitting on Ainsley. “Are some of them inappropriate? Making advances you don’t want?” The green grass clouded my vision, jealousy and protectiveness surging. If someone had made her uncomfortable or worse, they’d be having a conversation with my fist.

She shook her head firmly. “Nothing like that. I mean, it’s happened. I’ve been propositioned. But it’s never been uncomfortable, and I’d never get involved with a married man. Ever.” Stiffness edged her joints. “I know how damaging that can be.”

She didn’t offer more, but her words were a reminder that, technically, I was still married, and Ainsley didn’t have a clue. Tessa wasn’t part of my life in any meaningful way, but the knowledge weighed on me. I also sensed something ugly in Ainsley’s past. Without even knowing the details, it made me want to rewrite her story. Fill it with nothing but laughter and smiles and success. That wasn’t real life, though. I knew what

it was to be discarded, deemed not good enough. My mother leaving her kids wasn't the same as some prick sneaking around behind his spouse, but it all came down to loyalty.

Cheating was a hard limit of mine, too. Unacceptable. It's why Tessa's accusations were such a blow. She should have known me better. Believed I'd never treat my partner with that little respect.

Tired of poking those thoughts, I brushed Ainsley's hair behind her ear. "So these men you work for, you don't like being around them?"

Her jaded sigh was dredged from her bones. "It's more than that. I don't just buy clothes for them and their wives. They ask me to send gifts to their girlfriends, and I know it's wrong. Like so wrong. I'm facilitating their affairs, and I get sick every time I think about their wives finding out. I'm friendly with some of these women." She nuzzled her head under my chin. "I'm sorry. I'm ruining our we-just-found-out-you're-not-gay time."

Another laugh rumbled through my chest. "Baby doll, don't ever apologize. I don't like seeing you this stressed, but I'm glad you told me. I'll help you figure something out."

"Yeah?"

"We'll brainstorm. Try to find ways for you to expand your client base before making any rash moves. Get you away from those assholes without taking a pay cut."

"Can we do this brainstorming naked? Like tonight? I'm feeling a wave of insight coming on, but my clothes are distracting me." She placed two fingers on my chest and walked them toward my belt buckle. "Yours are distracting, too."

I exhaled a pained grunt. "As tempting as that sounds, I have bad news."

"You only have four hours left to live?"

"If you keep looking at me like that, I do."

She screwed half her face into a beastly grimace. “Like this?”

“Yeah, weirdo. Like that.” I dropped a kiss to the end of her adorable nose. “A friend’s in San Fran for a visit, and we have plans. Then I’m heading out of town for a few days.” The way her face fell shouldn’t have made me grin. The defeated slump in her posture shouldn’t have had me wanting to run a victory lap. I was in trouble. “I need to head back to D.C., tie up some loose ends there.”

Meaning I had to surgically remove Tessa’s talons from my neck.

“Work stuff?”

My lungs stilled. Each nob of my spine scratched into the coarse tree bark.

Ainsley had never asked about my past. She’d obviously assumed I was seeing Emmett and left my romantic history at that. I should open my mouth and tell her about the clusterfuck of a divorce chasing me, but it had taken me months to tell Nana the lewd details, worried she’d believe the slander. Ainsley and I were just finding our feet. If I told her about my divorce, there would be questions, and I’d have to explain the extent of Tessa’s accusations.

I offered her a partial truth. “I have a house that hasn’t sold yet and some furniture pieces I have to ship.”

“That sucks.”

“It does.”

Unaware of my unease, she pushed away from me and flopped on her back, pouting like a child. “I am not disappointed at all. I will not be using Blue Bunny while wishing you were between my thighs. Won’t happen.”

Leave it to this hellcat to ease my discomfort with her ridiculousness. I straddled her, pinning her wrists by her sides. “Who is this Blue Bunny? And do I need to be jealous?”

“You do. His stamina is remarkable.”

“Explain yourself, doll.”

“He’s my fuck buddy, and he’s rechargeable.”

My blood burned hot again, and my grip on her wrists tightened. “Sounds like a busy bunny.”

She tried to blow away the blond hairs streaking across her face. “You know what they say about rabbits. Plus I’ve had some issues to work through lately.”

Her and me both. My recent evenings made my teen masturbation-athons seem amateurish. I could swing by her place later, after drinks with Jimmy, steal a few hours with her before sleep and waking for my flight. But that’s not how I wanted things to begin with Ainsley. “If I can cut my trip short, I will.” I pushed to my feet, then helped her up. “You need me to dust off your ass?”

She shoved at my chest, and her belly rumbled. “What I need is food.”

What I needed was to get my life in order.



By the time I walked into The Blue Door, most of the unpretentious wine bar was full. Luckily, Jimmy and Emmett had already secured a table. The dim lights cast a glow on the wine collection filling the back wall as Eric Clapton drifted from the speakers. I found an empty place at the crowded bar and nodded to Cameron. “Hey.”

He reached for a bottle of Pliny. “The usual?”

I’d been here enough that I could order with as little as a head nod, but my impending trip and my slight deception with Ainsley had me craving something harder. “Double Scotch on the rocks.”

“Coming right up.” Cameron was as tattooed as Jimmy, but instead of sporting a mess of wavy black hair, his blond pompadour was neatly styled. He poured my drink, then pushed my tumbler of amber liquid toward me. “Who’s the new guy?”

I glanced at my friends. Jimmy had been a fixture here awhile, introduced me to it when I'd moved back, but it was Emmett's first night here. "My brother."

"Seriously? You look nothing alike."

Emmett's wavy dark hair, olive skin, and darker eyes gave him a European look. As a kid, my sandy hair and square jaw often had people labeling me All-American Boy. "You mean I'm much better looking?"

His gray eyes cut to my brother, an appraising perusal that had my eyebrows inching up. Emmett attracted every available man in sniffing distance. I picked up my glass. "He's trouble. Don't say I didn't warn you." Cameron was a good guy, and I dug hanging out here. Last thing I needed was my brother the manwhore making the place uncomfortable.

Still, Cameron cast a searching glance at him. "Noted. You can settle up after."

I made my way to the boys and sunk into a seat opposite them. "Here's to a crazy day."

"Good to see you, too." Jimmy clinked his wineglass with my tumbler, Emmett following with his beer bottle. Jimmy swirled his glass. "To what do we owe the crazy?"

After the day I'd had, that was a loaded question. I hadn't mentioned Ainsley to Jimmy yet. Emmett didn't have much more dirt on the subject. Neither knew about Tessa's accusations and how painful seeing her would be on tomorrow's trip.

All this drama had my mind drifting to the one person who'd helped me when things had caved in with Tessa. *Summer Daniels*. Meeting her on my first Habitat build in D.C. had been a stroke of luck. We hadn't been in touch since before my divorce, and I hadn't thought about her in ages, but this trip to my past was dredging up all kinds of memories. The urge to contact her struck. Unfortunately, I wasn't sure she'd want to hear from me. Not with how our last talk had ended.

That left the boys.

My generous swallow of Scotch burned a warm path down my throat. “I’ve met a girl.”

“Nice.” Emmett grinned. “The one you were having lunch with at the Habitat build?”

“Yeah, but there’s a funny story there.” Guitar licks reverberated through the room, chatter rising and falling with it. The guys stared, waiting on me. This story wasn’t just funny. It was downright ridiculous. “She was being all cagey with me, tossing out all kinds of mixed signals, because she thought...” I sighed, aware I was inviting ridicule. I looked at my egotistical brother. “She thought you and I were an item.”

His grin spread until I could see his fucking molars. “She thought you were gay? That we were dating?”

All I could do was nod.

He released a roaring cackle. “Honestly, man, don’t buy me anything for my birthday. We’ll consider this my gift.” He grabbed his ribs and tipped forward, laughing his ass off.

Jimmy joined in, nearly spitting out his wine. When the wheezing assholes finally calmed down, Jimmy dragged his wrist over his eyes. “Because I can’t resist, what made her think that?”

Christ. I shouldn’t have told them. Emmett would never let me live it down, and Jimmy would have enough material to make our soccer matches hell. I scrubbed my hand over my mouth as I mumbled, “She knew Emmett from the gym.”

They both leaned closer, eyes squinting. Jimmy spoke first. “Didn’t catch that.”

Emmett’s contribution: “Louder, fucknut.”

I was so screwed. “She met *this* loser”—I jabbed a finger toward my giddy-ass brother—“at the gym and had a crush on him until she found out he was gay. So when he met me at the Habitat build and decided to grab my ass, she assumed we were a couple.”

If they were wheezing before, the two of them were nothing but a pair of frenetic hyenas now, smacking the table

and hooting. Every eye in the place was on us.

I sunk lower in my seat. “You two are such jackasses.”

“Man—” Emmett spat out one word before dissolving again.

“Too damn good.” Jimmy wasn’t much better.

Emmett took a few deep breaths like a goddamn yoga instructor. “I remember her now. Didn’t recognize her that day I visited you. But it’s Ainsley, right? She’s hot, man. Not great in a step class, but hot.”

“Yes, it’s Ainsley.”

“Back up a second.” All humor drained from Jimmy’s face. “Her name is Ainsley and you met her through Habitat for Humanity?”

His intensity had me sitting straighter. “Yeah. She started volunteering there, like, six or seven weeks ago.”

“Does she have long blond hair?”

“Yeah...”

“Curvy girl who looks like she should be toting a Chihuahua in her purse, sounds like a sexy chain smoker, and has a wicked sense of humor?”

I wasn’t just ramrod straight now, the air was leaking from my lungs. “How do you know her?”

“You will not believe this.”

“Try me.” My curiosity was spinning into dread. Had they dated?

He waved his hand in the air. “It’s nothing bad, just...wild. Sounds like she’s one of Rachel’s best friends.”

“Like *Rachel* Rachel?”

“No, dipstick. My other girlfriend.” He shook his head. “There are three of them, best friends who happen to have the same birthday. They met when they were out celebrating turning twenty-one. They’ve been close ever since. Ainsley had mentioned wanting to volunteer for something ages ago,

and Rachel knew you were at the build and suggested it, but we didn't think she'd actually joined up."

What were the odds? Maybe there was destiny involved in our meeting. A reason we'd found each other. "Wild is an understatement. You know her well?"

"Just met a handful of times, but the girls are really close. I'm guessing Rachel doesn't know about you, or she would've brought it up."

I didn't imagine Ainsley would have gushed to her friends about the gay man she fancied. What about now? I hadn't told her about my divorce or why I was heading to D.C. If she confided in Rachel and they put two and two together, the things I'd avoided would sound way worse than they were. "Does Rachel know about my divorce?"

Jimmy's nose was in his glass, his eyes closed as he inhaled his wine's bouquet. He swished a sip around his mouth then swallowed. "No. She knows you were in a relationship and are single now, but nothing more. You've always been tight-lipped about it. Figured it wasn't up for public discussion."

I blew out a shaky breath. "Thanks. I haven't told Ainsley yet."

Emmett cleared his throat. Fixated on Jimmy's revelation, I'd happily ignored my obnoxious brother. Or maybe he was ignoring us—his attention was lasered in on Cameron. "I'm gonna get the next round." He scraped back his chair and strutted to the bar like he owned the place.

We watched him a minute. Emmett leaned his weight on the bar. Cameron looked shy as he smirked and rubbed the back of his neck.

Jimmy cocked his head. "Is Cameron gay?"

"Whatever he's into, he has his sights set on Emmett. I warned him about Casanova already."

"That'll be interesting." He turned his dark eyes on me. "Might not be my place to say anything, but if you're into

Ainsley, don't you think you should tell her about your ex? Unless things are casual."

I had no idea what things were with Ainsley. When we'd left the park to get her lunch, we fell into step. Our arms had swung in time, the backs of our hands nearly touching. I wanted to interlace our fingers, fold her small hand over my forearm and hold her close. Except I had no clue if Ainsley wanted that kind of affection. We often laughed. We enjoyed our time together. There was no doubt our attraction was mutual. But she was a free spirit who spoke her mind, and the pain she'd hinted at in her past could have soured her toward relationships. A hookup might be all she was after.

"It's not casual for me. I'm really into her, but she works for a bunch of dicks who cheat on their wives, and I think she has personal experience with that hell. Not sure she'll take kindly to my divorce details. Haven't figured out how to tell her."

A few people stood from their table and squeezed by us to leave. Jimmy pulled his seat closer. "I can't help if I don't know specifics."

I'd already spilled all to Nana. I was ready to ignore my lawyer's advice and get involved with a woman before the divorce was finalized. There was no point continuing this charade. Head bent, I laid out the gist of it. How Tessa had freaked when I told her I wanted out. That she blamed me. Claimed I was having an affair. My anger and irritation rose with each word.

I'd picked apart our relationship countless times since it had unraveled. We'd met at college. She was beautiful—blond hair and red lips and full of confidence. I was away from home, missing Nana and Emmett, even my soccer team. Feeling at loose ends. Like I was a kid again, left to fend for myself. I got wrapped up in Tessa quickly. Her friends became mine. We spent our free time together. I proposed before we graduated, didn't hesitate moving my life to be with her. I craved building my own family.

That should have been my first clue things would fall apart. When I'd bring up kids, she'd sidestep the conversation. Her work hours extended. My job sucked. We'd fight. I wound up feeling more alone and discarded than I had since I'd stopped searching the beach for broken glass. Now here I was.

Jimmy finished the last of his wine. "Tessa sounds like a wack job."

"Vindictive, yeah. It's how she's been so successful at her firm. Thing is, Ainsley might not believe I'm innocent in all this. Since Tessa's spinning nothing but lies, and the divorce has to end sometime, I figured she didn't need to know yet."

He drummed his thumb to the music, nodding. "Just be careful. I won't say anything to Rachel, but you need to get this sorted before it bites you in the ass. And where the hell is your brother with our drinks?" He nudged his empty glass aside.

Another glance at the bar showed Emmett punching something into Cameron's phone, his number likely. Cameron was still smiling shyly, his hand lingering on my brother's as Emmett returned the cell. "Looks like drinks might be a while. But yeah, I'm trying to organize some face time with Tessa. That's why I'm heading to D.C. tomorrow. I'm hoping to talk some sense into the woman. Get our house sold and the papers signed."

"Sounds like an upward climb. I'd love to go out soon, though. With Ainsley and Rachel, when you're back."

Ainsley and Rachel. Still couldn't get my head around that. "We'll make it happen."

As long as Tessa didn't fuck everything up.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

---



Eleven letters to describe a knife or chisel's concave bevel.

*Or seeking release when your hunky crush is MIA.*

### H O L L O W G R I N D

AINSLEY

I didn't normally walk through life disoriented, barely able to coordinate my shoes with my belt, but yesterday's make-out session had rendered me intoxicated. Trapped in an endless state of horny inebriation. (Blue Bunny would need a heart transplant soon.) I couldn't stop imagining the situation going on below Owen's T-shirt. There was an undiscovered world under those wash-worn threads. He was a cityscape unto himself, all stacked bricks and polished marble. Miles of real estate to explore.

I was also dying for him to tug my hair harder and kiss me rougher, his thighs chafing mine as he thrust his length into me, but I found myself picturing other things, too. Us waking in bed together—those lazy mornings where you'd stretch and touch in the soft place between wakefulness and dreams. I'd always found that time intimate. Vulnerable. Sheets would rustle. Legs would tangle. Contented sighs would whisper along warm skin.

Missing that bond and imagining it with Owen had trepidation tapping restlessly in my chest. I wanted that

connection with a man. Wanted it with Owen, specifically. But I was nervous. Scared to walk that open road again. Owen seemed perfect, but there was no such thing as perfect. Perfect usually came with secrets and skeletons in closets. Or I was just wary of repeating my mistakes. Which meant I needed a diversion.

Thankfully, Rachel was in town. I'd be able to seek oblivion tonight while drinking fruity cocktails with my friends. I'd made plans to take Sherise dress shopping tomorrow. Felipe's wife, Gabriella, was on the books for Sunday. She'd need easy dresses and comfortable yet stylish shoes for their Italy trip. I had several stores lined up.

That left today. I had no clients booked. No sample sales were in need of my perusal, and I couldn't afford my own shopping until things turned around for my folks. Normally, I'd head to the Habitat site. Volunteering had become my safe haven, a place to release my turmoil through manual labor. But it was Friday. Basic reconnaissance had informed me that Anton Bickley would be at the build on Fridays.

My arch nemesis was a school teacher now. He'd be at the site weekly, guiding his co-op students through the paces. I should have used the intel to head over and apologize to him for my awful stunt, but when I thought about how terrified I'd been in that walk-in fridge, how disgusting it had been to stick my hand in a maggot-filled bucket, my temper would flare. I was sick about the cockroach prank. I was angry about Anton's bullying.

I wasn't sure which emotion would rule me when I finally faced him.

I chose a hike instead. The fresh air cleared my mind, but not my Owen Restlessness. I checked my phone incessantly afterward, hoping Owen would send a flirty text, to no avail. I also creeped him on Facebook, but the mysterious man didn't have an account. My wariness increased. People with secrets avoided social media, like my ex had. But Owen wasn't Brandon, and I was letting my past affect my present.

Hanging out with Gwen and Rachel would be the distraction I needed.

Unfortunately, when I met them at the given address and realized where they were taking me, I nearly left. “Is this your idea of a joke? What kind of club needs an elevator?”

“A new swanky one,” Gwen said. “Don’t worry. I’ll hold your hand.”

“You’d be better off holding a barf bucket.”

She tapped the toe of her turquoise stiletto, unimpressed, while we waited for Rachel to get off her cell. The girls knew I disliked confined spaces. They knew I’d be green by the time we reached the top floor. They also knew I’d recover. Checking out a new hot spot trumped my claustrophobia. “They better sell margaritas by the pitcher.”

Gwen petted my hair. “I’ll buy the first round. And we’re doing you a favor. You can’t spend your life avoiding your fears.”

Except avoiding the Habitat build today proved I could.

Rachel hurried over, jamming her phone into her overflowing purse. “Sorry. Mother drama. She thinks my niece might have meningitis because the little peanut coughed.” She planted her hands on her slim hips and exhaled.

I made the sign of the cross over my chest. “Let’s get in that moving coffin and get my torture over with.”

When the elevator doors opened on the thirty-eighth floor, sweat had gathered in my cleavage. My skin was likely more gray than blush. My lungs had shrunk to pea-sized and swallowing was an effort. Dizzy, I stepped into the bar. The massive windows overlooking San Francisco swayed, but the room was stunning. A spray of tiny lights exploded from the ceiling, mimicking the galaxy of city lights expanding across the night sky. The elevator sucked, but the view and ambiance were worth it.

Gwen slapped my back. “See? Piece of cake.”

Said the girl who jumped off cliffs. “There should be a margarita in my hand.”

Two and a half margaritas later, my Anton quandary and Owen Restlessness still lingered, but I maintained my game face. We chatted with Rachel about school and Jimmy and Napa Valley. Gwen regaled us with tales of rock climbing and bungee jumping that had me green again. We also tutted over her, making sure she was managing her mother’s illness all right.

We laughed and commiserated at our high-top table. I managed to fly under the radar until Gwen said, “How did everything work out with your latest gay crush? You two besties yet?”

That had Rachel perking up. “Please don’t tell me I missed another one.”

I said, “Nope,” and Gwen crowed, “Yep!”

Traitor.

Rachel sighed into her Chardonnay. “Honestly, the only crappy thing about living in Napa is missing all the little stuff. I need details.”

They mirrored each other, chins in hands, waiting on me. They were about to get more than they bargained for. “That story is a doozy, but I need another drink before I open the vault.” I drained margarita number three.

Rachel frowned at her almost-empty glass. “I’m not sure I should. Reckless Rachel hasn’t been out for a while. I’m like the Hulk. Days Without Incident: Two Hundred and Twenty-five.”

Except Reckless Rachel was a blast. Give my sweet friend four glasses of wine, and her inhibitions often vanished. Case in point: the Dildo Incident. If it weren’t for Reckless Rachel dragging us into a sex shop, making a fool of herself, then running through the street with a dildo while screaming, “I have a penis!” I wouldn’t have found Blue Bunny.

I fluttered my Lancôme lashes at her. “I rode the elevator. Drink up, girly.”

Three men in slacks and button-downs, who had been circling us like sharks, finally moved in for the kill. The tallest led the way. “How about we treat you ladies to that round?”

I didn’t blame them for hitting on us. I could strut through a *Sex and the City* rerun in my fluffy tulle skirt and pink strapless top as Carrie’s stunt double. Rachel’s red dress flaunted her tanned skin and freckles. Gwen was her usual rumped-yet-styled self in a loose off-the-shoulder top and skin-tight black pants. Guys assumed we got dolled up to impress them. So adorably naïve. They’d never understand that women often dressed for women. I had to look my best for my girls.

Clueless, these men lingered. All three were fit and handsome. Business types with fancy watches, Crest Whitestrip teeth, and superhero jaws. Before Owen, I’d have flipped my hair and angled my cleavage their way. Before Owen, I’d have accepted their flirtatious offer. After Owen, I said, “Thanks but no thanks.”

Rachel was taken, Gwen was on an asshole break, as she called it, and I was...

Big, fat question mark.

Defeated, the men went to search for other fish in this glittery sea, but Gwen leveled raised eyebrows at me. “Since when do you turn down drinks?”

“I don’t know. Nothing. Whatever.” God, I was pathetic.

Rachel nudged Gwen. “She’s lying to us.”

Gwen lifted her chin, studying me. “I know.”

“Does it have to do with that gay guy?” Rachel asked her.

“Maybe. She was weird on the phone about it.”

“You two suck,” I said, reminding them I was at the table. But we often pulled this stunt, omitting one person from the conversation to make them squirm. It totally worked. “Yes, it’s about that guy. There’s a story. Get me my drink first.”

Gwen saluted me and scurried over to the bar. Rachel grooved on her seat to the smooth R&B tunes. A Rachel

groove looked like a giraffe on stilts trying to ice skate. It should have been enough to entertain me while I awaited my liquid courage, but thoughts of bars and flirting and buying drinks had me picking my newly polished nails.

Because *Owen, Owen, Owen.*

As maniacal as I'd been with him at our park yesterday, pawing at him like it was my job, insecurity had swept over me since. My history with Brandon kept rearing its ugly head, reminding me how painful relationships could be until my anxiety had stretched its wings, flapping fitfully through my belly.

Owen was in D.C., and his life there was a blank crossword with no clues. There could be an ex-girlfriend. He could be out with friends in his own ocean, circling schools of fish, buying drinks.

We hadn't discussed what we were, or if we were exclusive. We hadn't even been on a proper date. (Dinner with Gay-Not-Gay Owen didn't count.) Yet I felt like we were an item. Weeks of talking and laughing had set the stage for a romance that peaked yesterday. If he went out with another woman, it would hurt.

Gwen returned with our drinks. I downed half of mine, then blurted the whole story. Worried I'd impede my wish, I hadn't told them yet about my volunteering, but needing advice trumped that silly superstition. I finally admitted my Habitat for Humanity work. Meeting Owen. Then Gay Owen. Then Not-Gay Owen. I couldn't unpack the Anton Bickley situation yet and omitted that particular soap opera, but I bled out the rest.

Rachel spun her wineglass. "You met Owen at the Habitat build?"

"Yeah."

"Is he tall and fit, with a deep voice and sandy hair? Looks like he belongs at a rodeo?"

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Have you been creeping me?"

“Oh my God. Owen!” She smacked her hands together. “This is *insane*. He’s friends with Jimmy. The one I mentioned volunteered at the build.”

I blinked, dumbfounded. “My Owen is the Habitat guy, and he’s friends with Jimmy?” I’d been reduced to repeating the obvious.

“From when they were teens. They played soccer together. They reconnected when Owen moved back to town. This means we get to double date!”

Gwen shook her head. “That’s actually pretty nuts.”

Absolutely crazy. It also meant Rachel might have intel. “So”—I sat on my hands before I picked my nails to death—“have you guys hung out?”

“A bit, but usually short chats after a soccer match. We did have lunch once.”

“And?”

“And what?”

I rolled my eyes at the ceiling. After six years of gym workouts, drunken nights, and gossip sessions, I shouldn’t have to spell this out. “I need to know *all the things*. Did he have a serious girlfriend in D.C.? An illegitimate child? Does he run a drug ring or work as a gigolo at night?”

Gwen snickered. “Shouldn’t you know all this? You just said you guys have done nothing but talk for weeks. Why didn’t you ask about his history?”

“Because he was *gay*.” I needed to apply for new friends.

My soon to be ex-bestie tossed her head back with another wild laugh, pretty much all she’d done since I told them I’d flirted with another man after asking Owen to describe his ideal BJ. Once she’d gained control of her faculties, Gwen wrenched one of my hands from under my thigh and laced our fingers together. “I’m sorry, love. I will make fun of you forever for it, but I get that this is hard for you. I wasn’t sure you’d let yourself fall for someone again after Brandon.”

She kissed my knuckles, and we turned our attention to Rachel, who shrugged. “I wish I had more dirt. He did have a girlfriend or something in D.C. and is single now, but that’s all I know. He seems like a good guy. Jimmy wouldn’t be friends with an asshole.”

There was truth in that, but it didn’t lessen my turmoil. “I hate Brandon for ruining me like this. I shouldn’t be this nervous to date again.”

The girls traded sad, puppy-dog faces. To me, Rachel said, “Have you told Owen?”

I extricated my hand from Gwen’s to sip my drink, curling in on myself the way I had with Owen yesterday when the words were at the tip of my tongue. “No. I almost did, but I chickened out.”

There was nothing easy about admitting you were dumb enough to be duped.

“Well, I think you should,” Gwen said. “Putting your trust in him is a big deal for you. If you’re not honest, you guys don’t stand a chance.” Gwen never minced words.

Rachel’s doe eyes softened. “From what I know of Owen, and what you’ve said, he seems like the type of guy who’ll put your mind at ease. You deserve this, Ainsley. There are lots of jerks out there, but there are good guys, too.”

They were right. I knew they were. I had to lay my dirty laundry out for Owen so I didn’t wind up worse off than after Brandon’s betrayal. Although watching my friends fill my ex’s door lock with expanding foam while he was inside had made me giddy. Navy Seals had nothing on us.

As I’d done a hundred and seven times today, I slipped my phone from my purse to check my messages. My belly whirled at the sight of Owen’s name. He’d texted me an hour ago.

Owen: My hotel room is lonely.

It was like he’d sensed what I needed to hear. With the time difference, he was probably asleep by now, but I couldn’t resist replying.

Me: Don't they have gay porn?

Owen: I've already watched it all.

I could practically hear him chuckling from three thousand miles away, and I clenched.

*Clitoris catnip.*

Owen: You at home?

Me: At a club with the girls. The margaritas are flowing.

The girls in question made kissy faces at me and my phone. I could only imagine the goofy grin I was sporting. One word from Owen, and I was like a giant mop, swoopy and loose. Or maybe it was the margaritas. Rachel's fourth glass of wine was almost finished. She dragged Gwen to the dance floor, giving me some privacy. I snorted as Reckless Rachel made her appearance, busting an uncoordinated move. I should have been filming the moment for posterity, but my attention slipped back to my phone. To Owen on the other side of the country.

There was no reply.

Me: You still awake?

Owen: We'll talk later.

My levity dropped. There was nothing but a chill in those words. A chill I understood. If he'd told me he was at a club with friends, I'd have shut down on him, too. God, I was insensitive.

Then I stooped to a new low.

Me: Guys came by our table. Asked to buy us drinks.

His pause lasted an eternity.

Owen: Don't know what you want me to say to that.

Music thumping, heart racing, I typed out my reply.

Me: I told them no.

Another pause.

Owen: Why?

I didn't know where we stood, couldn't control what he was doing or thinking all that distance away. But I could be honest.

Me: Because the only guy I want to drink with is you.

His next delay held more promise.

Owen: Ainsley.

Me: Yeah?

My bated breath was practically fogging up my phone.

Owen: I miss you something fierce.

My heart pinballed. The stars and lights around me exploded in my eyes. I needed more of him, something to get me through the next couple of days. He was three hours ahead of me, but he was awake.

Me: Don't move. Don't go to sleep. I'm heading home and want to hear your voice.

Owen: I'm not going anywhere.

I gave the girls sloppy hugs, braved the elevator down (only nearly passed out once), then took a cab to my place, slamming the door closed as I hit his number.

“Hey, baby doll.”

I melted onto my white duvet at the sound of his voice. “If you answer every call like that, I’ll be hitting redial all day.”

A half sigh, half laugh tickled my eardrum. “Glad you called.”

“Tell me again how you miss me?”

The rustling of sheets echoed. It was 3:48 a.m. his time. He was in bed. Did he slumber in the buff? In briefs? In pizza-slice printed pajamas bottoms? “I can’t sleep. Keep thinking about kissing you.”

“Just kissing?”

“No, doll. Not just kissing. The gay porn didn’t help.”

A yelp of a tipsy laugh burst from my lips. “Promise me we’ll always joke about my idiocy.”

“That’s an easy promise to make. How was your night? Aside from assholes picking you up.”

Jealousy edged his tone. I liked it. “Fun. Always nice to see the girls, and I found out a juicy tidbit about you.”

Heavy breathing replied. Then quiet. He was probably exhausted. I grabbed my lattice Calvin Klein pillow and tucked it under my arms.

“What did you hear?” His eventual question sounded scratchy, his deep voice roughed up by the late hour. His twang made an appearance, too. That sexy lilt he often kept hidden.

“Looks like we have friends in common—Rachel and Jimmy.”

A whoosh of an exhale slipstreamed from D.C. to my San Francisco bedroom. “Yeah, I found that out before I left. That’s who I had plans with.” His tone lightened. Hopefully he was as excited about the notion as me.

But I was a teensy bit more than excited now. I had my construction hunk on the phone, his sensual voice purring through the line. Feeling wired and overheated and frisky, I kicked off my heels and attempted to get naked.

“What’s that noise?”

I stopped thrashing around. “I launched my heels into the wall. Or do you mean the zipper sliding down the side of my dress as I dislocated my shoulder?” I’m sure I could have made that sound sexier.

He grunted—a low, masculine sound. “Ainsley…”

“Owen…”

My queen bed was a fluffy white cloud, my soft blue walls adorned with black-and-white fashion photos. It all looked hazy, probably hot-boxed by my heavy breathing. Zipper down, I shimmied out of my Carrie Bradshaw dress and dragged my pale pink panties and bra off. All that was left was a very horny woman. Blue Bunny was lounging on the duvet by my head, recuperating from today’s workout. I snatched him up and let him buzz into my phone.

Owen answered with a “*Christ.*”

“You want to play with me, or should we hang up so I can play on my own?”

“Has your bunny been busy?”

“Is your wrist sore?”

His next guttural sound came out more like a pained sigh. “Turn it on and spread your legs for me. Nice and slow.”

Holy Hannah. Dropping my head back, I let my knees fall wide and revved my little blue engine. “Are you touching yourself?” The need in my voice should have been embarrassing, but I was past the point of caring.

His baritone dropped an octave. “I’m gripping the base of my cock. I’m so turned on, baby. So damn hard. I’m stroking my whole length, slow but tight, picturing your luscious curves.”

Odds are I wouldn’t need battery assisted help to come. “Have you done this before? Because you could teach a class.”

His muffled laugh was hot and hoarse. “You’re my first. Now take that bunny of yours and press it to the top of your

inner thigh. Beside your pussy. Don't get greedy on me. Tease yourself the way I'll be teasing you in a couple days."

Forget a class. He could earn a doctorate.

Following his rasped orders, I touched the edge of my vibrator to the juncture of my thigh. The buzz sent a spark to my center. "Oh. That's nice." So close yet so far from where I throbbed.

"I bet it is. Imagine how nice it'll feel when my face is buried in your pussy. I'm gonna plant wet kisses everywhere." His panting grew shallow. "Give you nice long licks and quick flicks and suck you until you scream. Now move your toy to the other side. Next to all that wet heat. Picture me between your thighs."

Molten lava dripped through me, his erotic words making me bubble and steam. I upped the speed but did as he asked—teased, tormented, and tortured myself. I pictured his dirty-blond hair tangled in my hands, could practically feel the scratch of his scruff on my sensitive skin. "More," I begged, the needy girl I was. "What are you doing?"

"I'm picturing your lips wrapped around my cock. Your tongue swirling and head bobbing. I'm stroking faster. Getting harder. So hard, baby. Because of you. Now"—a rough grunt sounded—"now press your blue bunny exactly where you need him. *Christ*, Ainsley, I'm close."

I was about to fly apart. The second I touched the buzzing tip to my nub of bundled nerves, I cried out. My hips shot up, my knees slamming together as I pressed down. "Owen." All breath trapped in my chest. "I wish you were here. I want you so badly." So much pleasure concentrated in one exhilarating spot.

"I'm going to spend hours exploring you. Fucking *hours*. Now move your hips. Close your eyes and let go, because I'm...fuck...Ainsley, baby, I'm..." He roared from across freeways and cities and farmland. He called my name and growled, somehow closing the distance between us. His heavy breathing slipped through the phone, down my sizzling skin, urging my hips faster, and I burst open. Everything clenched

as pleasure shot through me, currents of snapping heat. “Oh, Owen. God. *Yes.*”

My high crested, endless shockwaves knocking me senseless, until I was too sensitive for Blue Bunny. I was too sensitive for a light breeze.

Blissful, I turned off my bunny and pulled the lacy quilt from the end of my bed up to my chest. “I’m paralyzed.”

Owen released a satisfied chuckle. “I’m sticky.”

That was quite the visual, unbelievably hot. I was languid and loose, heading into a pleasure coma. “I wasn’t kidding, you know, at the site yesterday. I want you to come on me. I’ve never wanted something like that before. Is it weird?” Although I often lacked a filter, my blunt honesty with him surprised even me.

“You trying to get me hard again?”

“Maybe?”

“Doing that to you, seeing it? It might ruin me.”

Letting my heart go with him could obliterate me. My anxiety returned, a sudden rush of nerves churning the alcohol in my stomach. His breathing evened out, but mine sped up. I could hang up and never see him again. Quit volunteering—avoid him and Anton all the things that scared me. Return to a life that, although unfulfilling, didn’t turn me into a panicked mess. That wasn’t what I wanted, though. I wanted this. *Him*. Our lunchtime talks and easy ways. To learn everything I could about this man. Which meant I needed to be honest with him. I had to share my past so I didn’t freak out and screw this up.

A familiar sting of humiliation closed my throat, an allergic reaction to memories of Brandon and heartache and my stupidity. Swallowing hard, I pulled my quilt higher. “My last boyfriend cheated on me.”

“Oh, doll. No.”

“Yeah. It was two years ago. I thought we were in love. Until I surprised him one evening. He was in bed with his

coffee barista.” I squeezed my eyes shut, a flash of his bare ass pumping between her legs almost making me heave. “We’d been talking about moving in together, and I wanted to surprise him and tell him yes. I’d already given up my apartment, and had to crash on Gwen’s floor for a month. The man was a lying prick, but I’ve never felt so stupid in my life.”

“I’d like to meet this prick in a dark alley.”

His protectiveness curled around me, soothed me, as Owen’s sweet understanding always did. “I’d like to watch that, but it’s in the past.” Still, I pictured Sally’s shock when faced with her husband’s betrayal the other day. Remembered my own tragic fall. Could I really risk experiencing that again?

My silence must have hinted at my worry, because he whispered, “I won’t hurt you, Ainsley.”

Again, exactly what I needed to hear. His promise had me happy and nervous and overwhelmed. Regardless, I wanted to try. Force myself to open up and let this sweet man more fully into my life. I twirled the corner of my quilt in anxious circles. “Are you my boyfriend?”

Not knowing if we were exclusive, or if he’d visit the D.C. habitat build and lay pipe with other hardhat-wearing do-gooders, was messing with me. My heart raced faster than Blue Bunny.

“Do you want me to be?” His Southern lilt pushed into his tired voice.

Sneaky bugger, answering a question with a question. “Yes.” I relaxed deeper into my mattress. “I do.” The simple truth of it.

“Good thing, because I got your name tattooed on my chest.”

Contentment filled me. “You wouldn’t be the first man.” My father had my portrait inked on his forearm, mine and my brother’s names branded over his heart.

“I don’t like hearing about other men, Ainsley.” His possessiveness was adorable.

A sleepy smile spilled across my face. “I’d like details about this ink, though. Do you have tattoos?”

“One.”

“Oooh. Do tell.”

A lion’s yawn propelled through the line. “I need to sleep. Not sure if I’ll make it back Monday. Things aren’t going as smoothly as I’d hoped.” He was silent awhile. Long enough that I worried he’d fallen asleep. Then, “I’ll be back by Tuesday for sure. It sucks being away.”

There was tension in his voice, and my untrusting radar pinged. *Owen was too good to be true*, my intuition taunted. I shook off my paranoia. He was just tired and missing me. “At least Blue Bunny is rechargeable,” I whispered.

We breathed. We sighed.

“Goodnight, boyfriend.”

“Sleep well, girlfriend.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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Seventeen letters for the part of a furnace where the burn occurs.

*Or* getting locked in a room with the claustrophobic woman who drives you wild.

### COMBUSTION CHAMBER

OWEN

I spent the cab ride to Tessa's law firm coaching myself. *Don't lose my temper. Speak calmly. Slap on some Southern charm.* The fact that she'd cancelled yesterday's meeting and rescheduled for today was irritating at first, but I was over it. I replayed the good times we'd shared. I tried to picture us eating Chinese food on the floor of our house the night we'd moved in. I replayed snippets of Tessa's "soulmate speech" from our wedding, rehearsed though it had been. I remembered the early days when we'd go for evening walks, talking with ease.

We were together nine years, married for eight, but the last six had been a struggle. Like we'd agreed to refinish opposite ends of a wood table, only to realize we'd used different stains, separate visions guiding us.

It was time to strip our relationship down to its bones.

The elevator ride to her floor was more of me repeating my silent mantra. *Offer her a smile. Remind her of our history. Wish her the best for her future.* By the time my feet hit the firm's marble floor, positivity seeped from my pores. I would get this done. Convince her to tie up our loose ends. We'd loved each other once. We gave it a shot. All that was left was to torch our losses and move on. Especially when I had Ainsley waiting for me back home.

Ainsley and her toys.

I'd never had phone sex before. Never stroked myself so roughly or come so hard. It had taken all my willpower not to book a flight back to San Francisco the next day. But being with Ainsley meant dealing with Tessa, once and for all. Then I'd be free, and I could finally tell Ainsley about this mess.

It was a gift, her trusting me enough to open up about her ex, but I'd shut down afterward, couldn't confess that I was accused of the same sordid behavior. She worked for assholes who cheated on their wives. She'd been dealt the same harsh hand. If I didn't get Tessa to retract her claims, I'd likely lose Ainsley before we had a proper start.

I took a deep breath. Then two more. I straightened my tie and cracked my neck.

*Treat her as good as Nana.*

The office was a study in sleek, shiny surfaces, slicker lawyers to match. Everyone marched with purpose—briefcases swinging, arms pumping at their sides. I fell into step.

Tessa's office was at the far corner. Our meeting was scheduled for this afternoon at my lawyer's firm, but I wanted to have a private talk first. She didn't know I was here, and neither did my attorney. He'd have given me hell for facing her without him, but desperate times called for desperate measures. If Tessa and I could begin face-to-face, kind words offered, I was sure we could wipe our slate clean.

So focused on my end goal, I nearly smacked into my old friend. "Caroline, wow. It's been ages."

She stood, brown eyes wide, as though stunned to see me.

Of all Tessa's coworkers, Caroline was the one I'd adored. We'd often have dinner with her and her husband. Unable to convince Tessa to have kids, I'd doted on Caroline's two girls, even playing dress-up and letting them paint my nails. I'd coached the oldest in soccer, and had used Caroline as my wing-woman, bouncing plays off her on the sidelines.

Sad, the people I'd lost when Tessa and I fell apart.

"It's great to see you." I moved aside to let others pass. "How's Sam? She coaching her team yet?"

Instead of replying, Caroline's lips pinched tight. She was a head shorter than me, but her fierce glare had me stepping back. "Don't insult me by asking about my daughter." She inched closer and dropped her voice to a fiery hiss. "Do you know how hard it is for a woman to get ahead in this firm? How much we sacrifice? It only works if we have someone in our lives we can count on. It's not easy for Richard, being with me. But we made a promise to each other, and we fight to make it work. What you did to Tessa is an insult to all women. An insult to our friendship. I suggest not showing your face here again."

There was no waver in her accusation. No hint of disbelief that I'd cheated on my wife.

A slow boil started in my marrow, heat searing my neck and ears. I'd helped drive Caroline's girls around when her mother had passed away. She and Richard had invited us to their country home every fall. How could she swallow Tessa's lies? "I don't know what she told you, but none of it's true. Not a word of it."

Caroline's smooth ponytail and suit were as polished as every surface in the place. She sharpened her scowl. "Save the bullshit for someone who cares."

With that, she marched off, heels clicking, anger billowing. And my temper flared. No. Not flared. It erupted. All my serenity vanished, all positivity obliterated by white-hot fury. The emotion was potent. Raw. Tessa was the one who'd

chosen work over me. She was the one who'd forgotten our anniversary and cancelled dates. Yet here I was, painted the villain.

I clawed at my tie, my breath coming hard and fast. Why would she ruin me like this? How could my close friends believe her? It all hurt so damn much.

Rage pumping through my veins, I plowed ahead and smacked shoulders with some asshole in a suit. I ignored Tessa's secretary as she called for me to stop. I barged into the office I'd visited hundreds of times prior, my vision darkening at the edges. Gone was my inner calm. Annihilated were all happy memories of our time before.

All that remained was *wrath*.

Tessa glanced up from her desk. Her blond hair was shorter, her blunt bangs framing a symphony of expressions flitting across her face—surprise, fortitude, and something that resembled...hope. Which was odd. Probably another tactic. *Manipulation Queen*. She went to open her red lips, but I was faster. Or my temper was.

I didn't speak nicely, couldn't find my voice of reason. I curled my hands into fists and shouted, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Me?" She reared back as though I'd slapped her. "You have some nerve, storming in here and hurling insults."

"Nerve. Honest to God, you could teach a course in nerve. And I don't get it. After years of neglecting our relationship, why the hell are you investing so much energy in it now?"

She leaned into her chair slowly and considered me. "I wasn't the only one in our house. It takes two to tango. Don't pretend like you hadn't checked out of our marriage years ago."

Always back to her same insanity. "I didn't cheat on you."

She steepled her fingers, exuding outward calm, but she couldn't hide the telltale blotches at her neckline. "That's not what I said, but, as usual, you hear what you want to hear. It's

amazing, though. After all this time, you're still clinging to your lies."

"Jesus, Tessa. We're *done*. Finished. And I never once betrayed you. The sooner you accept that, the sooner we can end this mess. I've met someone, am finally finding some happiness. It would do you some good to stop obsessing over me and do the same. Move on, for God's sake."

A calculated glimmer lit behind her darkening glare, the same sharkish feature she displayed when she had an ace up her sleeve in a big case. Before she'd execute the killer blow.

"I will be moving on. From my lawyer. She suggested I accept our recent house offer, a ludicrously low amount. I was debating it, but after this lovely conversation, I'm having second thoughts. I'm wondering if my counsel has my best interests at heart. I think I'll fire her." A grin slithered across her face.

I nearly punched a wall. Finding a new lawyer and getting him or her up to speed meant things would be delayed for another eternity. More games. More tactics. Just to infuriate me.

Mission accomplished.



My flight home was a blur. My gums and teeth ached from clenching my jaw. My shirt and jeans itched at my skin. A sharp headache pierced the base of my skull until my temples felt ready to rupture. Goddamn Tessa. And fuck me for letting her scheming screw with my head.

All I'd done the past hours was replay our argument, and my stupidity in giving her the upper hand. The urge to contact Summer Daniels had also resurfaced.

Since thinking about her at the bar with Jimmy, she'd been on my mind, but it would have been selfish. When we'd met on the D.C. Habitat build, we'd both hit low points in our marriages, confiding in each other as we'd weathered our

respective storms. Talking with someone going through similar turmoil had given me clarity, but I'd overstepped my bounds and broke her trust back then. It was no surprise she'd shut me out, but it was because of her I'd found the courage to end my marriage. I needed to thank her for that one day.

By the time I landed and reached my truck, I could barely see straight. I moved by rote: Key. Ignition. Gas. Brake. It wasn't until I was nearing the Habitat build that I realized my headlights had been pointed there. I'd planned to go home, wash the fiasco and disappointment from my skin, but there was something I needed more.

I parked opposite the site and turned off my truck. I sat. The thrum of the engine subsided, leaving a heavy stillness in its wake. I dragged a hand down my face.

Then I saw her.

Workers had begun heading home. Ainsley stood with her pink tool belt on and pink Converse, grinning, ponytail hanging out the back of her hardhat as she chatted with a volunteer. She was a vision, all bright smile and cupid lips. She was a breath of fresh air.

She was also my girlfriend.

Such a juvenile word to define our relationship. It didn't come close to describing how one glimpse of her uncoiled the muscles in my neck and sent my heart beating back to life.

There was something else, too. It was unfamiliar, this intense ache migrating through me. A vise grip stopping my breath and clogging my throat. Not with anger. Not anymore. This was longing and rightness and fear that we were fleeting, too fragile to last.

I shoved open my door, needing to get her in my arms. Ainsley's attention shot to me. Without looking away, she said something to the volunteer, who then laughed—probably at some dirty joke—and left Ainsley waiting for me.

My girl's rounded cheeks shone, like she'd devoured a secret stash of Halloween candy. That vise grip on my lungs tightened. *Mine*. She was mine, and I wouldn't let Tessa or her

lies ruin us the way they'd ruined the other relationships in my life. God, did I need Ainsley in my life.

Instead of giving Nick and the remaining workers a show, I grabbed her hand and hauled her after me toward the nearest townhome.

"You're back!" she squealed from behind me.

"You're too far away."

"You're holding my hand."

I walked faster. "I should be kneading your ass while I crush you against a wall and lick every inch of your body."

She whimpered.

This urge to devour Ainsley was a wild buzz, more intense than anything I'd ever experienced. It took root in my gut, splintered through my limbs. It made me feel untethered and famished. Crackling with desire. And *happy*. The simplest of emotions brimming until my disastrous trip was nothing but a distant memory.

I could hear her scurrying to keep pace. Our palms were dampening, my grip on her slender fingers unforgiving. She didn't seem to mind.

I led us into the half-finished building and tore into what would be a bathroom—a small space with a small window. The only room with a door. They must have installed the door since my last day, and the second I had Ainsley inside, I tried to shove it closed. It dug into the floor, jarring my arm. Guess I'd be leveling this out tomorrow. Today its only purpose was providing privacy for the sexual tension about to be obliterated.

Squaring my shoulder with the wood, I launched into its center, slamming it closed. Something rattled in the frame. My pulse rattled in my neck.

I spun around. "You're still too far."

Her blue eyes were heavy with lust. "Then get over here, cowboy."

I descended upon her, knocking her hardhat off and capturing her lips with mine, groaning at the contact. It was instant, how she made me soft and hard at once, melting my angst yet shooting me full of steel. I plunged my tongue between her plump lips, a little rough and a lot needy, each swipe searing my mind. I groped her ass and waist and breasts. So many curves. Too much clothing.

Her teeth sunk into my bottom lip as she tried to climb my body. “You’re so tall.”

“You’re perfect.” I hoisted her up, latching her legs around my waist, and swiveled, slamming her back against the door with a violent thud.

A strangled *oof* pushed from her pretty mouth. “That’s sexier in the movies. I think I broke my spine.”

Head thrown back, I chuckled. “Doll, I fucking—”

Whoa.

*Love you.* That’s what I’d been about to say. In jest, maybe, an off-the-cuff fondness often offered to friends, but it was more. It was everything.

I’d only known Ainsley two months, not that long, but long enough to piece through my need to see her today and the whirl of emotions spinning through me and understand this was definitely *more* than infatuation. And she was in the dark about my past.

She had no clue I’d ever even been married.

Legs locked around me, she trailed wet kisses down my neck and along my collarbone, but I couldn’t reciprocate. Her openness in the face of my duplicity was too much.

Her teeth bit, her tongue licked. I was riled up, dying to see her creamy skin, but it didn’t feel right. She deserved to know. The basics, at least. She confessed a deep truth on the phone. I had to man up and offer the same. Find a way to explain Tessa’s accusations without losing the first person in years to make me feel alive.

I returned her kisses, exploring the column of her neck, the delicate lines of her ear. Then I pulled back. “We need to talk.”

“We need to kiss.”

It was hard to argue with her breathy sounds and rotating hips, her body plastered against mine, but this was important. Honesty was important.

I inched away from the door, lowering her so she could find her feet. My shirt was twisted. Hers was halfway up her stomach. Her eyes darted to my hand as I adjusted myself in my jeans. “We do need to kiss,” I said, “but I have some stuff I have to tell you.”

She tapped an impatient sneaker. “I’m not sure what you’re playing at, but I’m a tad horny, and unless you finish the job you started, and I get to strip you naked in the nearish-immediate future, I will die of blue bean.”

“Blue bean?”

“Blue bean.”

Even with my impending admission, this woman had me amused. “I don’t follow.”

“*You* get blue balls. *I* get blue bean. It’s not fun, so wipe that ridiculous grin off your face.”

I covered my mouth with my hand, unsure when my smile had gotten so wide. “Sounds painful.”

“You have no idea. So get on with whatever conversation is more important than saving your girlfriend from an excruciating death.”

I sobered quickly, shoving my hands in my pockets as I played the words in my mind. I had to say this right, not scare Ainsley off.

Before I could speak, she touched my cheek softly. “You’re making me nervous. What’s going on with you?”

Nothing. Everything. My life tumbling out of control. “I didn’t tell you the real reason I went to D.C.”

She snatched her hand back, like she'd been shocked. "You didn't have to sell your house?" Confusion sunk in a line between her eyebrows. There was uncertainty there, too. Wariness.

I forged ahead. "No. I *did* have to. I still do, but there's a reason it's lingering on the market." A stray nail was on the floor, and I rolled it under my boot. "I'm in the middle of an ugly divorce, and my ex is making things difficult. Including selling our house."

Recoiling farther, she blinked and shook her head. "You're married?"

God, the distress in her eyes. Her chest rose faster, while mine caved in. "No. I left her months ago. Nearly a year. It's just the law and paperwork getting in the way of ending things."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I should have, right away, but I was hoping to clear things up on this trip. Hoped I could tell you the divorce was final."

Her distrust was palpable, red blotches dotting her neck. Moisture glazed her beautiful eyes. It hurt worse than Caroline's disdain at Tessa's office and hearing Tessa's lies. I should be making Ainsley smile, not causing her pain, tossing roadblocks in our way. And there was still one left to wedge between us. A massive boulder. But the second I opened my mouth to explain how bad things were for me, a tear slipped down Ainsley's cheek.

Startled, she dashed it away. "God, I don't know why I'm crying. I'm really not that girl. It's just..." She fanned her face. "I think I need some air."

"Oh, doll. No." Unsure what to do, I pulled her into my chest. "It's over with her. I promise. On my life. Please, don't worry."

But she would. Worse than this if she got wind of the slander I'd been dodging. I couldn't risk it. Not this early. Not after Caroline's venomous insults and Tessa's newest antics. As long as Ainsley knew the facts, the *truths* of my divorce—

that it existed, and that it was challenging—was all that mattered. The rest was fabrication, distortion. Lies that would be meaningless when our papers were finally signed.

Ainsley pressed her face into me, and wetness coated my T-shirt. She used it to wipe her nose. She could use me as her own personal Kleenex, for all I cared. Anything to make her feel better.

“Air,” she said again. “I’m fine. I really am. I just need air.”

I stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head. “Sure. We can talk about it after.”

Releasing her, I took two steps and yanked on the knob. The door didn’t budge. I gave it another hard pull. Nothing. Frowning, I gripped the damn thing with both hands and jerked with all my might. It moved a millimeter and jammed. “Fuck.”

I examined the edge, bending down to feel the warp of the floor, the slight upward slope preventing the door from moving.

“Owen...” Ainsley croaked my name, her voice dripping with distress. I whipped around to find her breathing harder, pure fear on her face. “Why isn’t the door open?”

That’s when I remembered her claustrophobia.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

---



Eight letters for a device used to increase the static pressure of fluid passing through a system.

*Or* a boyfriend who shares a humiliating story to distract you from certain death.

D I F F U S E R

AINSLEY

The walls inched closer, the temperature in the shrinking space skyrocketing. Moments ago I'd been fine. Better than fine, about to experience an *oh-my-God-yes-yes-yes* with Owen's hands on my body. Not through a battery-operated bunny or discovering a vintage Oscar de la Renta accidentally marked down. My construction hunk's sinful lips had been on my skin, my legs around his waist.

Now I was seconds from hyperventilating.

Owen held up his hands as though I were a rabid dog. "It's okay. We'll get out of here. It's just stuck. I'll get it open."

I pulled at my T-shirt's neckline and forced a swallow. "Okay."

But I wasn't. Not by a long shot.

His lie by omission still hung in the oppressive air, and there was nothing rational about claustrophobia. No concrete

reason I could be in this room one minute, no thought to the size of the space, and a second from a panic attack now. It wasn't level-headed. Logic was no longer at play. It also didn't change the facts that forcing air into my lungs was becoming a challenge.

"Hurry," I managed.

His worried gaze darted over me like I was a stick of dynamite about to be lit, which sounded accurate. Swiveling, he began working furiously on the door. He kicked the bottom closed, yanked at it again. He studied its perimeter exhaustively. When that didn't work, he turned with another fierce, "I'll get you out of here," then proceeded to pound on the Evil Door and shout for help.

Not promising.

I walked backward, until my butt hit the far wall. I slid down its length. There were rough-ins for a shower, toilet, and sink around me, electrical wires protruding from the walls. The unfinished floor undulated as my focus swayed. My heart had never beat so loudly, a steel drum pounding in my ears.

If I weren't close to losing it, I'd probably come up with a fun crossword clue for the instrument, but losing it I was. My focus blurred as my mind tripped back to Chucky's Chicken and me slamming my body and fists into the unmoving exit of the walk-in fridge. Laughter had assaulted my ears that day—coworkers taunting me with promises of freedom, only to be denied.

Trapped. Imprisoned. Suffocated.

Today there were no derisive slurs, only Owen's increasingly frantic efforts and the dwindling oxygen powering my lungs. *I'm going to die wearing sneakers and a tool belt.*

I wasn't sure when Owen had crouched in front of me. I could barely register his gentle hands on my face. "I called Emmett. He's on his way. We'll get it open together. He shouldn't be long."

My saliva had turned to sludge. “You called him?” It was then I noticed the phone on the floor by his boots.

He nodded. “I’m sorry, doll. This is my fault. I was so desperate to see you. I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“Maybe a striptease will help.” My attempt at levity waned under my shaky voice.

He must have heard the panic coursing through my words, but that didn’t stop Owen from standing and reaching for his belt. “Whatever you need.”

“I need a football stadium’s worth of air, and I was joking.” I pulled my ponytail away from my neck, hoping to cool down. I closed my eyes and counted to ten, but everything seemed to shrink closer, spin faster. When I blinked, Owen was still hovering in front of me, a sly smirk on his full lips. He pushed the edge of his leather belt through the buckle and flicked the prong from its home. He released the ends slowly and popped the button of his jeans.

“Honestly,” I said, “don’t waste your *Magic Mike* moves on me today. The blue bean has turned gray. Fear doesn’t increase my sex drive.”

Ignoring me, he slid his zipper down and dropped his jeans to his knees, displaying black Hugo Boss briefs and the package they held in place. An impressive package. I should have been panting to crawl toward him and slip that thin cotton *down, down, down*, but I was sweaty and nauseous and hot and clammy at once. Still, his male review continued. He flipped around and dropped his underwear, flashing his toned ass.

And...what in the hell? “Is that a tattoo?”

“Yep.”

Forcing my windpipe to function, I leaned forward and studied the spray of black ink on his left butt cheek. “Are they Japanese letters?”

“Apparently. You asked on the phone if I have any tattoos, and this is it. But I have no clue what it means.”

I shocked myself by laughing. “I so need an explanation for this.”

“Thought you would.” He pulled up his briefs and jeans. Once facing me again, he jutted his chin in my direction. “Okay if I join you down there?”

His awareness of my discomfort, his concern, had me breathing slightly easier. “Sure.”

Nudging me forward, he sunk behind my back, letting me lean on him without wrapping his arms around me and constricting my airflow further. He pushed my hair aside and kissed my neck. “It was, like, nine years ago. Maybe ten. Shortly before I met Tessa, my ex.”

Hearing her name had the thickness in my throat expanding. It gave her life, made her real. It emphasized his exclusion of this important fact. I couldn’t imagine Owen being like Dean or Thomas Arlington the *third*, spewing lies about divorces that would never happen. But Owen’s blatant avoidance of the topic nudged at the damaged tissue guarding my heart, warning me not to trust men.

His chest expanded into my spine, his deep voice following. “I’d sometimes go out with Emmett, hit the clubs he liked. We always acknowledged the anniversary of the day our mother left us. Not sure why. A reminder of what we still had, maybe? Or a ‘fuck you’ to her. Either way, once we got fake IDs, we’d go out and get drunk. That night we went overboard. The club and the scene were nuts.”

“A gay club?”

“Yeah. A wild one, with disco lights and men in crazy outfits. Pretty sure I danced a lot, and I made out with at least one guy.”

“Seriously?” I didn’t know why I found that so hot, but I did. Unbelievably sexy. “Did you like it?”

“It was nice, but it didn’t turn me on. I never did it again.”

I pictured my masculine man rubbing bristly cheeks and hard bodies with Aazam (Because *Aazam*), and a glimmer of my desire sparked back to life. “Is there a video?”

His chest shook as he laughed. “No video, thank God. We kept drinking. Hard. It was the most wasted I’ve ever been. The last half of the night is a blur, but I remember waking up, my head as painful as it’s ever been, then I spent the next six hours puking my guts out. I didn’t notice the tattoo until I crawled into the shower the next evening. I also wasn’t sure why my ass hurt so bad. At first, I freaked out. Thought maybe more happened with that man than a kiss.”

Squealing, I covered my mouth and cackled into my hands. “Oh my God. If I didn’t know the outcome of this story, I would not be laughing at you right now, but *oh my God.*”

“Don’t hold back. Emmett never does.”

“I mean, they make movies about this stuff. Actually, it’s something Rachel would totally do after four glasses of wine, but I digress. Continue your confessional.”

I leaned my head back on his shoulder, giddy for the rest of his juicy story. I was still uncomfortable, but I could once again access the rational side of my brain. Thanks to Owen’s distraction techniques.

Still giving me room to breathe, he traced shapes on the dusty floor. “All I know is what Emmett’s told me. A friend of his back then was a tattoo artist. We ended up there, and I got inked. When I asked Emmett what the hell the Japanese letters meant, he busted his gut laughing. I endured that a few times, until I gave up. Whatever it means, it’s enough to send my brother into hysterics. I decided I’d rather not know. If I had to guess, I’d bet Emmett had the guy tattoo something stupid like, *Ugly Bastard Eats Shit.*”

He went on to talk about Emmett and him, two teen boys who’d wanted to ride horses and run soccer fields until the sun set. I listened. I breathed. More oxygen pumped through my lungs. The walls didn’t press so closely.

I listened. I breathed. I fell harder for Owen Phillips.

I became aware of how much I’d missed him while he was gone. Still, he’d withheld vital information, reigniting my innate distrust. His admission had sent my mind careening to a

disastrous time in my life, all of it jumbling together until a traitorous tear had pushed from my eye. I wasn't a crier. Yet there I'd been, rubbing my ruddy face against Owen's T-shirt.

Stupid Brandon and his stupid lies, messing me up like this.

Owen's stories ended, silence blanketing us. A soft place that cushioned my sudden vulnerability. I curled my toes in my sneakers. "Is there anything else, Owen? About this divorce I need to know? I want to believe you, that your ex isn't part of your future, but you should have told me when I asked about your trip. So is there anything else you've kept from me?"

His whole body froze. Not a smidgeon of air puffed against my hair. Then, "It's hard to talk about it, and my lawyer has been on me to keep quiet, so I'm not used to opening up. But that's the truth of it. My ex is bitter. She's giving me hell, getting in the way of selling our assets." Another pause stretched, this one speeding his heart rate. His pulse point raced against my cheek. "She's also been—"

Owen's cell phone leapt to life, and I shot forward. He reached for it, pushing to his feet as he spoke to Emmett. "First townhouse you see. Walk through the entrance, then down the hall to the right. You'll see the closed door. A safety floodlight is on inside."

I hadn't realized how dark it had gotten. Not with the muted glow seeping into the small room. It was bright enough to see relief etched on Owen's face, but I couldn't tell if it was because Emmett was rescuing us from this room or *him* from that conversation.

My panic resurfaced. Without Owen behind me, his rumbling baritone in my ear, the reality of our situation slammed home. We were still stuck. It was still too warm. The ceiling was still too low. It wasn't as intense as earlier, but I'd donate half my wardrobe if it meant escaping this coffin.

"You guys okay?" Emmett pounded on our door.

"Just glad you're here. On the count of three, you push and I'll pull."

The boys attempted to use their body mass to force the stubborn piece of wood into submission. My wilting temperature had reached a full-on sweat. Effort five was the clincher. Owen practically flew on top of me as the door busted open and fresh air wafted in. *Salvation!*

Crawling out on all fours, I rolled onto my back in the hallway and inhaled the entire atmosphere. “I almost died.”

“You look okay to me, Stepper.” Emmett towered over me, grinning.

“Is that a step class insult?”

“It is.”

“I rocked that class.”

“Your face nearly hit the riser.”

“Details, details. And speaking of details, I need to know what Owen’s tattoo means. I promise not to tell him.”

He winked at me. “I’ll take it under advisement.” He smacked his brother’s ass. “You guys need an escort home? Any kittens rescued from high places?”

“Fuck off.” This from Owen hovering at my right.

“You’re welcome. See you at soccer this week.”

Owen crouched beside me and cupped my cheek, all his rugged handsomeness showering me with concern. “How you feeling?”

“Pathetically weak and embarrassed that something so lame reduced me to a panic attack.”

“Nothing to be ashamed of, doll. Just wish it hadn’t happened.”

“You and me both. Actually...I’m still feeling drained. I might need a full fireman carry out to my car.”

Dropping his head forward, he chuckled. “Think I can manage that. Up with you, then.” True to my silly request, Owen slung me over his shoulder, turning sideways to avoid smacking my head into the wall.

I draped myself over him like a cheap dress and copped a feel of his jean-clad behind. “Next time we do this, you need to wear those fire pants and suspenders and no shirt, and oh... I’ll smear charcoal all over you.”

“Not on your life.”

“What if role playing turns me on?”

I could sense him smiling. “I’ll take it under advisement.”

“You and your brother are no fun.” I bumped against his back as he carried me to my car.

Gently, he lifted me up and over him, setting my feet on the pavement. “You want to come over tonight?”

Although we’d escaped certain death, tension still radiating from him, a point in his jaw ticking. Something felt off. Like it had while in the Evil Bathroom.

Owen had stiffened before Emmett cut our conversation short, poking my intuition that he had more to hide. Intuition I’d vowed wouldn’t fail me again. But his tension was likely due to my claustrophobia display, and my distrust issues were surely messing with my mind. That must be it. Owen couldn’t fake his sweet nature. He was a gentleman at his core. Kind. Courteous. Thoughtful. Sexy as a sweat-slicked cowboy drenched in sunset.

If I was going to move past Brandon’s betrayal, I’d have to start with trust.

A rush of nerves fluttered through my belly. “I’ll shower and meet you there.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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Seven letters for the surge of an electrical current in one direction.

*Or giving into desire even though warning signs ring in your ears.*

### I M P U L S E

AINSLEY

Apparently Owen lived in a garage. At least, that's where my GPS led me. A large steel door was open, light streaming out, along with old jazz tunes. Tools and a few pieces of furniture filled the stain-splattered space. The corrugated walls were rusted in spots, the concrete floors cracked. It had a vintage vibe to it. Classic, like something you'd see in a greaser movie.

It also housed a brawny man who was bending over a plank of wood, teasing me with his taut *derrière*.

"Did you pay extra for the view?"

He stood and twisted toward me, eyebrows pinched. "View?"

I gave him my best sleazy-stalker eyes as I focused on his lower half. "It's definitely nicer than at my place." This I could do. Flirt and joke as usual. Find our familiar rhythm and forget

the conflict on his face at my car, the unease still gnawing at my gut.

Smirking, he dropped the sandpaper on his work-in-progress and smacked his dusty hands on his jeans, a stupid sexy move. He took long strides to reach me. “The view just got a hell of a lot better. Not sure they could put a price on it.”

This man was some kind of dangerous. “Aren’t you a charmer?”

“I’m honest.” He proved his point with his lips on mine, his hot breath filling my chest. The kiss was slow and deep, more intimate than our desperate necking in the Evil Bathroom. Our tongues pirouetted in a perfect ballet duet.

Hopefully we weren’t performing *Romeo and Juliet*.

His huge hands caressed my back as he rolled his hips into me, showing me how turned on he was. The Hugo Boss Package was indeed *large*. A solid line of granite jutting into my belly. “You make it hard to breathe,” he murmured.

My purple satin panties were dampening by the second, my apprehension increasing, too. “Since I almost suffocated tonight, that would make us even.”

He nosed my ear, the underside of my jaw. “Being even would mean forcing *you* to listen to all the ways I’m going to eat your pussy, then making you watch me flirt with another woman.”

“Touché.” His gentle explorations had me shivering, his dirty words firing the ache between my thighs. But it was all too much. A tug of war waged between my body and my mind, fear of getting hurt versus pent-up desire pulling at me.

I ducked around him and headed for the large table against the wall. “Is that the piece you finished? The maple table?” I sucked in a lungful of air, urging my pulse to slow.

“Yeah.” His voice grew quiet, and I glanced back. He dashed his hand through his sandy hair, a sweet blush dotting his cheeks. Was he nervous? Shy?

His humble uncertainty was endearing, and I gave myself a mental slap. I should be claiming him right now. Dragging him to a tattoo shop to have my name stamped on his other butt cheek. We could be making wild, passionate love.

Instead I walked the perimeter of his creation. I dragged my fingertips along the smooth wood, tracing the shimmering lines and colors tumbling through the grain, searching for my Zen.

During a few of our lunch confessionals, Owen had talked about this project. His eyes would go soft, his voice dreamy as he'd describe what working with wood meant to him. Working with *his* wood would likely plaster an equally blissful expression on my face, if I could get over myself. "It's spectacular," I said.

"Really?"

I wasn't expecting his voice to be so close, or to be so timid. Need for approval rang clear in his one hesitant word.

I spun around and had to look up to meet his bashful eyes. It hit home then, how much making furniture meant to him. How touching it was like touching his soul. "Better than stunning. It's real. It's what a table is supposed to be—strong, built with integrity and heart."

It was also the embodiment of this man.

"Thank you," he said softly. A beat later, a lecherous grin lit his face. "We should move this conversation and talk about my *wood* upstairs."

We should. We so should. So why was I still freaking out?

In seconds, he had the garage door closed and was pushing me up a narrow staircase. Each step toward our impending sexy time had my heart thrashing in my chest. I was horny as anything, wanting this sensitive yet powerful man moving inside me, but I still couldn't calm down. My adrenaline rush from the Evil Bathroom was surely messing with my mojo. It couldn't just be fear.

Before I could gather myself, we were in his apartment, his strong arms latched around me from behind. "You seem off.

You still shaken from earlier?”

“Yeah, I think so.” At least I hoped that was part of it. Stepping to the side, I twisted from his grasp. “I also didn’t tell you, but I found out Anton will be at the build every Friday. I thought about confronting him, but I’m not sure if I’ll yell at him or grovel for his forgiveness.”

Owen scratched his jaw. “Considering what went down between you, I’d say that’s a normal reaction, but this is eating you up. You’ll regret letting it go.”

He was right. I’d have to sort through my emotions and face my past. Just another dilemma to an increasingly melodramatic life. Theatrics that were wearing me down. But the larger concern, the more pressing issue, was the hunky man who wanted to discuss his *wood*.

“Also,” I said, the stalling champion, “this is my first time in your place. I need to do a full recon mission. Make sure it’s safe.” Buy myself some time.

He cocked his head, amusement returning to his handsome face. “Did you bring a search warrant?”

“Matter of fact, I did.” I lifted my top and flashed my double Ds.

Owen assaulted me with his sunburst smile. “I fucking love that purple lace. You have five minutes. Then we can talk about my wood, or, if you’re not feeling up to it, we can watch a movie.”

I wanted to be up to it. I wanted to be all over his Hugo Boss-clad *wood*. Our phone sex had heightened his hot factor, ratcheting up my fascination with his magnetising self. Maybe snooping in his place could help tame my crazy. I could confirm he wasn’t hiding a second or third divorce, or a harem of exotic women.

I scanned the room, trying to decide where to begin. The space was small but neat. A leather couch and flat screen TV flanked a wood coffee table, a shelving unit made of something similar on the opposite wall. Likely built by his stalwart hands. The shelves were lined with books. Smarty-

pants books. My English teacher, Mr. Lawrence, would have probably traded his first born for those well-worn volumes.

Shakespeare. Voltaire. Other long names I didn't recognize.

"Were you one of those kid geniuses? Like your grandmother skipped your grades and you wound up at university at fifteen and couldn't figure out why your facial hair was patchy?"

His rolling laugh filled the room. "Man, I don't know where you come up with this stuff. But yeah, I worked hard in school. I got a scholarship, but didn't fast track. I watch some TV—mainly HBO shows and movies. Otherwise, I built a deck off the back. I sit out there some nights to read." His attention flicked toward his stove. "Four minutes left."

Shoot. I hit his open kitchen next, studying the beer, deli meats, and condiments in his fridge. No girly vegetables or tofu or yogurt to be found. I kept up my peanut-gallery commentary, though, tallying up the items filling his apartment as if taking inventory. I then invaded his bathroom, scoping the space for fancy face creams and nail polish remover. His shower soap gave me pause. It smelled like him, like apple crumble steaming from the oven. I dragged my nail over the green bar, stealing a sniff.

Basically, I was acting like a lunatic.

"Ainsley."

Heart *pound, pound, pounding* in my ears, I plastered on my most innocent face and turned. "Yeah?"

"Is this because of what I told you earlier? My divorce?" Owen scrutinized my fidgetiness. He was on point. We both knew it. Once I slept with him, this connection we shared would go from intense to transcendental. There was something bigger here than I'd ever shared with Brandon, and my ex's betrayal had rocked me to my core.

If Owen hurt me—

I guillotined that thought. Owen was watching me, uncertain yet steadfast. A strapping man with a tender side

who wanted me in all the ways a man could want a woman. It was time to start living and stop worrying. It was also time to get sexed up. “The fact that you never mentioned your divorce has thrown me for a loop, but I get that it might be hard to talk about. I’ll get past it. It’s just my issues rising to the surface.”

He crooked a finger, beckoning me closer. “Come here.”

He wasn’t giving me bedroom eyes. He was laying down serious eyes.

Warily, I approached. When I was within reach, he ran both his hands through my hair, skimming my scalp until his palms rested on my cheeks. “I care about you a lot, and I’m sorry I didn’t mention my divorce. If you just want to hang out tonight, count me in. I’m dying to be with you, but there’s no rush. I also love the idea of squishing with you on my couch. We don’t do anything more until you’re sure.”

His understanding loosened the knots inside me, reminding me how different Owen was from men I’d known. No matter his needs, he was putting me first. Only a good man would do that, and I was tired of letting Brandon infect my life. “My nerves are because of my past. Not my present. I trust you.”

He kissed my forehead, my nose, my lips. “That means more than you know, but it doesn’t have to happen tonight. When you’re ready, just say the word.”

My remaining reservation vanished. Everything disappeared but this beautiful man. “Word.”

He pulled back, appraising me intently. “You’re sure?”

“Positively.” To prove my point, I took control of my life and chasséd my way into his bedroom. Owen followed closely behind. I pirouetted in the simple space, taking it in.

A photograph of a beach hung on one wall, a large window occupying the other. There was a simple closet and nightstands. Dark gray walls, lighter gray bedding. Large, cushy king bed. A cowboy hat on his dresser. Aside from a lamp and smarty-pants book on his bedside table, the only other item of note was a mason jar filled with what looked like shards of glass.

I picked it up and shook it. “Do you collect bottle caps, too?”

My immature humor usually tickled Owen’s funny bone, but something in my comment hit a nerve. Darkness stirred under his sharp cheekbones. Closing the gap between us, he pulled the jar from my hands and set it back carefully. “We’ve done enough talking.”

And he didn’t want to discuss the glass. Not that I could blame him. His girlfriend of five days just tore through his apartment, cataloguing every inch of it. “I like your place.”

“I like you.” His chocolate eyes had reached ninety-five percent. Perfectly sinful.

I was horny and ready to indulge. “Then kiss me already.”

I didn’t have to ask twice.

He gripped my hips in a punishing hold, his fingers branding me with points of fire, and our lips fused. Our kiss rocketed to frenzied, both of us pushing against each other, deeper, harder, until my lips felt bruised. I was wet already, my panties likely soaked. I wanted his fingers there, his mouth, his *cock*. I needed him to alleviate this desperate tingling that threatened to burn my skin.

Pulling at his shirt, I shoved it up and almost wriggled my head into his black crew neck with him, stretching the cotton to get my greedy tongue closer to his abtastic body.

“You’re ridiculous.” He pulled me away and ravaged my mouth with his. The backs of my knees hit his bed, and I landed on my butt. I wore a cute pair of Juicy jeans and an animal print flutter top. The way Owen looked at me, I’d have guessed I was naked.

Chocolate eyes at ninety-eight percent.

Gripping my waist, he shifted me into the middle of the bed.

He knelt over me.

He pushed up my shirt.

He drew torturous circles on my belly, then lifted my top farther, over my bra, but not off. The cold air and his rapt attention sent goose bumps trembling over my skin. He traced my breasts, dragged his thumbs over my lace-encased nipples. His erection stretched his jeans.

“You’re beautiful, Ainsley. Steals my breath.”

He was stealing my heart, and my words. All my jokes and banter vanished, a swirl of emotion blooming in their place. I was going to fall hard for this man. I could sense the emotion refracting through me, the fragile beauty of a rainbow following rain.

Part of me still worried he wasn’t as good as he seemed, but I was passed the point of no return. “Owen...”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t hurt me, okay?”

Protectiveness surged in his fierce gaze. “You’re about to become mine, and I take care of what’s mine.”

God, this man. Coiled tight as a spring, I pushed up and undid his belt buckle, tugging at it and shoving his jeans down. He stood and toed off his boots. His Levi’s hit the floor next. Racing him, I lost my sandals, tossed my jeans beside his. His shirt joined the pile, mine following. We were both in our underwear, him in socks too, the sight almost funny if his body wasn’t sapping my IQ. Every chiseled inch of him fogged my brain with lust.

“You’re even hot in your socks,” I said. Okay, it *was* funny.

“I could leave them on.”

I shook my head. “Off.”

He removed them deftly.

He stood at the side of the bed, eyes hooded as he stared down at me. He gripped himself over his briefs and dragged his palm along his erection, legs wide, body strung taut. It was the hottest thing I’d ever seen.

Steamed up, I flicked my bra clasp and tossed the purple lace at his head. He batted it away with his large paw, his eyelids sinking heavier. I slipped off my panties, twirled them in the air, and launched them at his lampshade. His answering groan was beyond erotic, deep and rugged and all kinds of wicked.

I'd never felt so exposed, or desired.

He shucked his Hugo Boss briefs, joining my birthday-suit party, and his erection sprang free. *Whoa*. That was a lot of man.

His cock was thick and hard, the head engorged. All for me.

He skulked closer, hunger burning bright. But he didn't ravage me. As though I might break, he caged me, lowering himself down in a tortuous descent. The edges of our bodies brushed—knees, thighs, hips, the flats of our stomachs, our chests. Miles of bare skin connecting. We both exhaled for an eternity.

Nothing had ever felt this sensuous. This right.

We lay still for a beat, then our pace surged. We couldn't explore enough, fast enough, rough enough. He rocked his length against my thigh as he squeezed one breast, sucking my nipple into his hot mouth and palming my ass. I writhed. One second I was tugging his thick hair, then I was pulling at his neck, his shoulders, his tattooed behind. Greedily fusing us closer.

It wasn't close enough. "I might die. I need you inside me."

"God, Ainsley. I've never wanted a woman this much."

Pausing, he pushed onto his forearms. The distance allowed me to trail my fingers through his scratch-soft chest hairs. I loved the feel of it against my palm, the hard lines of his pecs and corrugated abs. His cock stirred and slipped off my thigh, lining up with my entrance.

Hypnotized, I swayed my hips, not allowing him access, just loving the tease of all that power and rigid heat, knowing

what was to come. Mainly *us*. “You’re so hot.”

My vocabulary had lost its mental thesaurus.

His cock twitched, making contact. He released a pained growl. “Fuck. Babe, I can’t take it. I wanted to lick and taste you, and I will. But I need to be inside you.”

Breathing hard, he nearly fell over as he fumbled with his end-table drawer, returning with a condom. My body turned hot and swollen as he tore the wrapper and rolled the latex down his hard length. Gripping the base of his shaft and squeezing as if to curb his arousal, he pushed one then two fingers inside me. I gasped at the sensation, clamping down on him while canting my hips up, needing him, needing more.

“You’re soaked.” His low voice sounded like it came from the abyss, a bottomless sea of lust. His gaze flickered then, as though hesitant, hinting to the sensitive boy behind the man. As though he was vulnerable, too, risking a nasty fall.

Maybe I wasn’t alone in this leap of faith.

His fingers kept exploring me, his other hand clenched around himself. I could barely handle the sting behind my eyes. I bit my lip and pulled him down, his weight on me, his thudding heart next to mine. Hands tangled in my hair, he eased his hips forward, an undulating roll as he slid inside me, slow and gentle. He stretched me wide, while our lips met and tongues danced, my world reducing to the points where our bodies met.

*Hips.* Fire exploded between my thighs.

*Calves.* Bristly hairs caressed my legs.

*Foreheads.* Silent promises offered.

“Ainsley.” He murmured my name, reverent, as his strokes quickened. I molded the bottoms of my feet over his calves, squeezing my knees into his sides, meeting his steady thrusts. Shuddering, he shifted his angle and lavished my breasts with attention, flicked my nipples with his tongue. His slight scruff scratched at my skin, spurring my arousal.

“I don’t want it to end,” I murmured.

*I don't want us to end.* They were still there, my irrational fears. The belief that love and commitment were fleeting things destined to fall apart. That Owen was too good to be true.

“This is just the beginning.” His eyes were at a full one-hundred percent now, molten and fierce. Begging me to trust him. He planted his palm on my cheek, holding me firm, not allowing me to look away. Our connection deepened, causing a tear to leak from my eye. We were joined, our bodies moving as one, our emotions bared in this unguarded place of openness. We didn't kiss. We rocked and moaned and whispered each other's names as we neared the peak.

“I'm close,” I panted.

“Let go, baby. I'm gonna explode.”

He lowered his full weight on me, cradling me close as we bucked together and tensed. My orgasm hit me in a towering wave, my insides clamping on him as I shook. I dug my nails into his strong back. His release followed mine, a surge of heat pulsing between my thighs. He rolled his hips harder into me, a string of expletives growled in my ear, his legs shaking until he collapsed forward.

“Will you still want me if I'm blind?” I rasped.

He laughed, his weight dropping heavier on my chest. “Definitely. Especially since I've lost my sight, too.”

“Blind leading the blind.”

“As long as I'm with you, don't really care.”

“You're heavy, cowboy.”

“Shit.” He pushed up and pulled out. His hair was sex-strewn, mine likely as tousled. We grinned at each other. “That was insane, and I'll be right back.”

He disappeared out his door, and I starfished on the bed, enjoying the afterglow. My body felt well-used and languid, a light tingly sensation still fluttering through my belly. My heart had also grown. It was engorged, inflated with *Owen, Owen, Owen.*

I imagined us cuddled on his couch while we fought over the remote, his sink crammed with my toiletries, our coats hanging side by side in his entryway.

I imagined a future with him.

I hadn't let myself think beyond sex with a man since Brandon. That kind of hurt hadn't been worth the risk.

Even now, the possibility of getting in deeper with Owen only to lose him to some awful deceit lingered. Time would ease this nagging doubt, the fear that he would hurt me. It also wasn't the worst idea to lower the intensity a notch. Wait for my overthinking brain to settle. I still planned to enjoy our budding relationship, but a bit of space would do me good, calm my mind. I began gathering my clothes.

I heard Owen before I saw him. "Not sure if you like classics, but we could watch a movie. Or I could watch you while you tear apart the rest of my apartment. We could find a breakfast place tomorrow." He walked in as I finished dressing. He frowned when I stepped into my sandals.

"Actually, I think I'll head home. That was amazing. You're amazing. But I need to take this slower than I realized, if that's cool with you."

His gaze darted to the jar of glass by his bed, tension tightening his features. "Yeah. Sure. I get it." But he rubbed the back of his neck in agitated strokes.

He pulled on his boxers, covering up all the perfection I could have spent the evening exploring, but this was better. This was what I needed. This would allow me to get used to the idea of Boyfriend Owen, so I wouldn't pull another stalker move and ransack his place like a complete kook. In time, I'd get over my past and trust him not to break my heart.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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Thirteen letters for the internal pressure that causes tubing to fail.

*Or* how your chest feels when your girlfriend learns your lie from someone else.

### BURSTPRESSURE

OWEN

Like a pirate nearing a treasure chest, I approached the lumberyard I'd visited a handful of times, greedily eyeing the stacks of reclaimed wood—mountains of maple and walnut and black ash. Trees salvaged from people's yards to be repurposed into functional furniture or decorative art.

My Mecca.

The owner, Ellen, waved to me, her Rottweiler trotting at her side. "You're becoming a regular."

"It's the woodchip fumes. Gets me high."

"If that were the case, I'd be rich by now." She nodded toward the large barn flanking the property. "Another piece of tiger maple came out of the kiln today. She's a beauty."

"Is that so?"

"Thought of you the second I saw her. Actually wanted to pick your brain about something." Ellen wore heavy work

boots and a tattered plaid button-down over loose jeans, her dark hair shoved into a messy ponytail. Her dog, Birch, loped away and nosed at a stick on the ground. The incessant grind of a wood planer whirred, kicking dust into the chilly air.

I loved the lack of pretension here. “Shoot.”

“The way people are salivating for all things recycled, reclaimed wood is hot. I figured it was a good time to add a retail component to my business.”

“Sounds smart.”

“Yeah, but I’m not what you’d call artistic. I’ve been chatting with some clients, sussing out who’d be interested in selling pieces here. I have ins with a few designers looking for one-off stuff. Nothing factory made. You have a good eye for the nice pieces that come through. I’d have to see your work, make sure it fits with my vision, but I thought I’d check if you’re interested.”

*If* I was interested? I was practically frothing to convince her I was the man for the job. It would mean doing what I loved for a living, using my hands and mind to fashion beauty from nature. “Very interested. What would you need from me, besides seeing samples?”

She whistled on her fingers as Birch wandered toward the wood planer. Her dog trotted to his master, tongue lolling. “I want to start with three craftspeople. Which means, if it takes off, you’ll have to produce the volume needed. I’m clearing the equipment from the front barn. I’ll want enough work from each person to fill it. Make it impressive. Everything will be done on commission, so no cash up front. And you’d be free to do other jobs. I’m not expecting exclusivity.”

Mentally, I calculated how much time I’d need to make another few dining tables, maybe coffee tables and funky barstools, too. I pictured the modern shapes I’d imagined over the past months—sleek lines left rough and natural in spots.

I’d kill to jump on this opportunity, begin my business in earnest, but her talk of cash and commission had me hesitating.

I had a decent nest egg squirreled away, and I was okay not making the money I had in D.C., but I had no idea how much more cash my lawyer would siphon from my account, or when Tessa and I would finally sell our house and divide our assets. Getting pieces done for Ellen meant giving up volunteer hours and likely some of my paid handyman work. If I said yes to this venture and my divorce dragged on, buying materials could dwindle my accounts past my comfort zone. If I promised Ellen I could fill orders and wasn't able to come through, it would tarnish my name.

But I couldn't turn down something this perfect. "Count me in."

We shook on it. "I'll swing by your space soon. Check out your work in the flesh. For now, come see that sexy piece of maple."

I left with three stunning wood planks in my truck bed, a future prospect that should have had me on cloud nine, but keeping my precarious finances from Ellen felt like a lie by omission.

A pattern of mine these days.

Ainsley had been at my place five times the past two weeks. Always my apartment, never hers. We'd eat dinner together, spend time on my back deck—her with a *Vogue* magazine, me with Shakespeare—not to mention the hours spent charting each other's bodies. We'd even gone hiking, my little fashionista smiling as we meandered along a leisurely trail. Each date I'd ask her to stay the night, and she'd make a joke or brush me off, leaving me in bed alone.

I'd fucked things up not telling her about Tessa from the start. Her guard was up now, waiting for the other shoe to drop. A shoe I could see hovering in midair, no clue how to force it to the ground without stomping on us. I kept hoping Tessa's new lawyer would, by some miracle, force closure to our never-ending battle. A childish wish, really.

Like believing Santa would bring me my mother for Christmas.

I pulled into my driveway and unloaded my haul. I stood, arms crossed over my chest, staring at the rough wood planks. My gaze blurred and cleared, blurred and cleared. This was my ritual, communing with the pieces, waiting for inspiration to strike.

“If you’re hypnotized, does that mean you won’t notice if I yank down your pants?”

My butt cheeks clenched at the sound of Ainsley’s raspy voice. The woman oozed sex. “Give it a shot. We’ll see what happens.”

Her heels clicked closer. She dropped a takeout bag at my feet and snaked her arms around my waist. “I like this better.” She pressed her face into my back.

My heart pressed into my sternum. Gripping her left hand, I channeled my inner Fred Astaire and twirled her out from behind me, then spun her back in. Her ass landed flush with my groin. “I like *this* better.”

She twisted her head so she could see me, awe in her wide blue eyes. “Owen Phillips, you really *can* dance.”

Exotic scents of Indian food curled thickly from the bag at our feet, but it had nothing on her natural musk, always smelling sweet. Like chocolate. I shrugged a shoulder. “Nana was a great teacher. And...” I caught myself before spilling that nugget. I had a habit of divulging my most personal stories to Ainsley. One whiff of this tidbit, and she’d flay me with her quick-witted humor.

She swiveled around to face me, still in my arms. She palmed my cock over my jeans. “And what? I sense another Embarrassing Owen Story. Don’t hold out on me, cowboy.”

“Nothing to tell.”

She gave me another rough stroke. Heat flooded my veins, everything taut and pulsing.

“Liar.” Smirking, she released me and wriggled from my grasp.

The bombshell fought dirty. “Get back here.”

“I need convincing.”

Prowling closer, I grabbed her wrist and placed her hand back on my aching cock. We moved together, my hand over hers as we both jacked me off over my jeans. My vision clouded. She cupped me tighter. Then she paused. “Let’s hear it.”

What I needed was to hear her moan and call my name in ecstasy, but she wouldn’t give up easily. Ainsley was stubborn like that. “I took a year of ballroom dancing. Free classes at a community center.”

*Let the jokes fly.*

She didn’t laugh, though. Breathing harder she started fumbling with my belt buckle. “Just when I didn’t think you could get any hotter, you go and tell me you took dance classes.”

“If I knew it would turn you on, I’d have told you the first day we met.”

“Then I’d have pictured you dancing with Emmett.”

“Better that than picturing him and me in bed.” An image I needed to bleach from my brain. Lust throbbing in my bones, I gripped her shoulders and forced her to a healthy distance. “What about our dinner?”

She eyed the bag, then my crotch. “I’m hungry, but not for food.”

*That’s my girl.* “Get upstairs and get naked. I’ll close up here.”

I slapped her ass to send her on her way. She squealed, tossing me a sexy smile as she took our dinner and her luscious curves upstairs.

She may not have been ready to open up fully, sleep over and risk getting hurt, but she was all in for the hours we spent together. Our dirty explorations between the sheets. Our lunches at the site. The endless texting in between. I was falling harder, deeper, but she seemed to be coasting, enjoying

our moments, not asking for more. For now, I'd take what I could get.

I stalked through my shop, my loose belt buckles clanking with my hurried strides. My hands itched to get back on my girl, but as I reached up to drag the garage door down, I halted.

A black SUV was parked at the end of the street, one I'd seen a few times recently. Not the usual pickup or beat-up car cruising this area. This truck was too posh to blend in. As though aware of my stare, its headlights shot to life, engine turning over as it pulled out and disappeared around the corner.

Paranoia gripped me, like I was in some TV cop show, invisible bad guys staking out my home. I hadn't felt this unsettled since Tessa first accused me of the affair. It had taken a while to figure out I was being tailed back then, by a sleazy private eye hired to dig up non-existent dirt.

The same disquiet was back. It shot my mind to our last meeting—Tessa's comment about me only ever hearing what I wanted. Something about it didn't sit well. I'd also been stewing over the evil glimmer in her eye when she'd bragged about firing her lawyer. It left me worrying she had more planned. Or maybe this was her grand scheme: to play the part of emotional terrorist, leave me searching for strange cars, nervous to bring a new lover into my life.

Well, fuck that and fuck her. I had a woman upstairs who was hilarious and sweet, a pinup girl brought to life just for me. Ellen's offer today meant there was a chance I could turn my passion into a business. Good fortune was coming my way, long overdue, and I deserved the chance to enjoy it.

I yanked down the garage door, a loud *clang* ringing as the metal struck the concrete, then I hastened up to my apartment.

Ainsley was in my room, in nothing but a skimpy pink bra and thong, my cowboy hat on her head. A stunning vision. She was doing some sort of ballet move, heels together, knees bending wide. She kicked out a leg and pulled her pointed toe up her inner thigh, twirling in place. The ends of her blond

hair flew in a circle. “Doll, you shouldn’t do things like that. Makes me crazy.”

She curtsied. The demure ballerina. “Crazy good?”

“Crazy amazing.” I grabbed my T-shirt by the back of my neck and yanked it over my head. My jeans hit the floor, my socks next. My straining cock stretched my briefs at an awkward angle. “I have proof.” I pointed at my dick.

She licked her perfect lips. “That you do.” She removed the cowboy hat and placed it on my head. “How was the build today? I was bummed I couldn’t make it.”

Digging my fingers into her hips, I hauled her against me, stomachs flush, skin against skin. Heat licked my spine. “The first section of homes is looking great. More volunteers have been showing up. We’ll be landscaping soon.”

“I hate missing it.”

I spanned my hands across her tailbone. “I hate missing you. You should come tomorrow, if you can.”

But she frowned. Tomorrow was Friday. Anton would be there. I’d met the man who’d ridiculed Ainsley in high school, clocked some hours with him and his students. I hadn’t been happy about it at first. Spent the first hour fisting my hands, but Anton was good with the kids, firm but well liked, it seemed. It bothered me, what he’d done to Ainsley, but people change. He also limped from his broken leg and had gnarly scars on his burned hand. He’d been through enough.

Ainsley kneaded my shoulders like they were stress balls. “I’m planning on ambushing him soon. The thought makes me feel like I’m stuck in the Evil Bathroom again, or the Chucky’s Chicken walk-in fridge, but, like you said, I’ll regret not doing it.”

I rubbed her back, realizing just how hard this was for her. How much guilt she harbored from a prank gone awry. Under her dirty humor and perfect nails was a sensitive soul.

We were in our underwear, talking and touching, but neither of us moved to take things further. She nuzzled her

cheek against my thudding heart, and her gaze landed on my bedside table. On my jar of broken glass.

She hadn't asked about it since that first time, but whenever she came over, I'd find her staring at the shards, occasionally picking up a piece and studying it. I'd shared a lot with Ainsley, a woman who blew into my life with her painted nails and name-brand clothes—a stylish hurricane. Still, there was something about that glass. They were pieces of me. Fragments of my most intimate memories and misguided hopes for my future, another childish wish: to find the owner of my missing pieces. Someone who could make them whole.

Make *me* whole.

Possessiveness rushed through me, a hot blast of longing to brand Ainsley, mark her as mine. My hands moved as I walked us to the bed. I kissed her shoulder and neck, sucking and biting as I pressed my weight onto her in the middle of my sheets.

She purred. “Oh, I like that.”

“You taste like chocolate.” Decadent.

Her moan turned into a light laugh. “My favorite chocolatier sells a perfume. I dab it on my neck.”

“That explains why I want to devour you.” *But not why I'm halfway in love with you.* The unbidden thought had my next nip turning into a rough bite, and our hips lined up.

She took control then, flinging my cowboy hat to the floor and flipping us so she straddled me, a playful look of reproach spreading. “Is that the only reason?”

“Yeah.”

She pinched the skin at my ribs. “Try again.”

“Okay.” I rocked my hips up, pressing against her from below, nothing but two bits of fabric between us. “The real reason I can't get enough of you is I worry about time.” I wasn't expecting to reveal that much of my heart, risk her

pulling away at my admission. I couldn't shove the words back in now.

She shifted her weight slightly, tiny ripples that teased us both. "Why time?" Hesitancy bit into her tone.

There was so much I wanted to say to Ainsley. Confess how often she occupied my mind, that our time apart was painful, and I wanted to watch every old movie with her nestled into my side, wash dishes with her *at my side*, cook with her, fight with her, make up with her, take her to Morocco like she'd dreamed, and find a thousand ways to tell her how her beauty hurt my heart.

I settled on a sliver of truth. "Because, after you leave, when I close my eyes I can almost feel you in bed, beside me. When I open them, and you're not here, disappointment sets in. The rough kind, like a hollow spreading in my gut."

She sucked in a breath, her chin trembling. She didn't speak, her unsaid words revealing as much as the moisture glazing her eyes. She felt it, too. I was sure of it—this unnameable connection. This sense of rightness. And she was scared. So Ainsley did what Ainsley did best: she changed the subject.

Blinking rapidly, she ghosted her nose along my chest, inhaling my scent. "You smell like apple pie."

"That would be my soap. Nana started making it a couple years back. She sells it at a few markets and sends me home with it every visit."

"I may need to buy a few bars."

*Or you could stay over, I didn't say. You could live here and shower here and use my soap and be mine.* But she wasn't, not with the one ugly truth I'd kept from her.

It was selfish of me, not telling her about Tessa's claims. The notion of speaking them aloud felt like breathing truth into the lies, giving them life. Still, it wasn't fair. If Ainsley found out some other way, it would undermine everything we'd built. Ruin it. Ruin us. Pretending the whole ordeal would blow over was a fool's errand.

She moved her hips faster, palms flat on my chest. I was pumped with lust and an aching need to be inside my woman. To forget this one small, yet massive snag.

But this couldn't go on. "We need to talk."

"We need to fuck." With a sexy grunt, she slinked down my body, moving deliberately, teasing bites and licks tracing a tortuous path.

My thighs bunched, my abs contracting with each languid exploration. *Christ*, this woman. But I gripped her shoulders. "Seriously, there's something we need to discuss."

She nipped my hipbone. "I'm sure it can wait."

I should have tried harder to stop her, fought the pull to melt into this moment, but she felt too good, and we could be on a timeline. When I revealed I'd been accused of cheating on my ex, I could lose her. She was already halfway out the door as it was...

Her fingers lingered on my pecs as she descended, and I let her descend. I gave myself over to the perfection of her hot mouth on my skin. She toyed with my nipples, my chest hair, tracing a trail to my throbbing dick, pulling my briefs off on her way. She hummed against my shaft, ran her lips up and down the sides, fondling my balls with her skilled fingers in a blinding rhythm.

I didn't know if it was our blowjob conversation on that disastrous date, or her inherent expertise, but Ainsley Hall sucking me off was a one-way ticket to Nirvana.

Which was exactly where she took me.

Her full lips swallowed me, the head of my cock hitting the back of her throat. It was like she didn't have a gag reflex, taking me deeper, working me harder. Her small hands gripped and pumped while she sucked and used her tongue. I couldn't help but move my hips and fist her hair, knees wide as my balls pinched, so much heat flooding my groin. Too much heat. I needed to see her eyes when I came, feel her pulse around me.

Pulling my hips back, I eased her up. She looked wickedly pleased, her lips red and used, her cheeks flushed. I flicked her bra clasp and tossed the lace, taking her breasts in my hands, so big and lush. Absolute perfection. Touching wasn't enough.

Lifting up, I kissed and sucked her supple flesh, taking her nipple between my teeth as she tossed her head back, arching toward me. Her hips moved, searching for friction, but I wasn't done. I went to work on her other breast, feasting on her, like the desperate man I was, eventually rubbing my face between her tits, happy to drown in all things Ainsley.

Her husky laugh broke my spell. "So you're a breast man."

"I'm an Ainsley man. Want it all." I thrust upward, only her underwear between us.

She whimpered and rocked, her pussy so wet and hot, drenching the thin fabric. Flipping us so I straddled her, I continued worshipping her breasts, the soft skin over her ribs, the dip of her belly button, the swells of her hips, perfectly full and womanly. I couldn't touch her enough, open-mouthed kisses trailing her from end to end.

When I reached the valley between her thighs, she trembled. "*God*, yes."

"You a praying woman?"

"Only if it makes you work faster."

"Still so demanding."

"Stop talking and start licking."

I chuckled, then blew a stream of air over all that wet heat. Her hips kicked and knees trembled. I ground my own hips into the mattress, trying to tame my desire, but being with Ainsley, smelling her arousal, pungent and sweet, had my blood pounding.

I kissed her, exactly where she wanted me. I thrust my tongue into her, grinning as she pushed into my face. I wanted her to ride me, steal her pleasure. Submerge in my own. I held her open and flicked my tongue, working her in a steady rhythm, then pulled back, teasing her, taunting her. She nearly

yanked out a fistful of my hair. When her frustrated groan dripped with hunger, I finally gave her what she demanded. Taking my fill, I licked and sucked until she bucked, little shocks shaking her pelvis.

Eventually, she pushed me away. “If that’s a form of religion, consider me a convert.”

I lifted onto my knees. “I love tasting you. Could do it all night.”

Her hooded gaze hovered over my dick, which jutted out toward her, hard and flush. “Sex now.” She gripped my length, giving it a solid pump. *Fuck.*

I sheathed myself in record time, then pushed into her. I lost track of time, of space. There was no shattered glass by my bed, no divorce looming over me. No financial issues or impossible conversation on the horizon. There was just us, fitting together. Her hands were on me, messy kisses traded, my thighs slapping against hers as I lifted her up, pushing deeper.

Breasts bouncing, she clutched the sheets as I drove into her. I watched where we were joined—me sinking in and out, tight wet heat circling me. Desire blasted up my thighs, driving me from hard to titanium.

She bit her lip and pulled me closer, wrapping her legs around my waist. “You feel amazing.”

“Heaven,” I agreed.

Eyes locked, we rode the high until we crashed. She tipped over first, clenching so fucking tight around me I shot off like a firework, calling her name as the high pummeled through me. We were both shaking slightly, breathing hard. A thin sheen dotted her brow, and I could feel condensation on my lower back, where her fingers danced. My head was hazy.

“Owen?”

The quiver in her voice had my awareness creeping back. “Yeah?”

She pulled my hips farther into her, keeping us joined. “I never thought I’d meet someone like you.”

Her face softened, trust and something more blooming... and my heart reared. I wasn’t sure if it wanted to gallop closer to her or canter away, but this moment wasn’t right. What I was keeping from her tainted it, corroded the beauty of her admission. My answering silence also had her frowning.

I kissed her lips, then pulled out and dealt with the condom. She was on the move, too, probably unsure why I was freezing her out. We got dressed in a distracted hurry. I mumbled something about our dinner. She didn’t glance my way.

This was *her* pattern: have sex and close down. Get dressed and get gone.

I’d stopped asking her to stay over, the rejection stinging more with each rebuke. Except her confession just now could have been her reaching for a lifeline. If I’d asked her to sleep with me for the night, she might have said yes.

I paused in my doorway, one foot toward getting plates and the Indian food she’d brought and letting us go on like this. Staying in this space where we had unreal sex and laughs, not the intimacy I craved, but no risk, either. My other foot was stuck in my room. Stuck in my past.

Just plain stuck.

It was time to offer Ainsley the honesty she deserved.

As I opened my mouth to do just that, finally sit down and spill the truth, her phone buzzed. She grabbed it from my dresser and tapped the screen.

I’d seen a symphony of expressions cross Ainsley’s face, from erotic rapture to stressed claustrophobia to simple joy. Her flaring nostrils and widening eyes were none of those things.

I stepped toward her. “Something wrong?”

The phone shook as she angled the screen my way. “Why don’t you tell me?” Her usual raspy voice thinned and cracked.

Cupping her outstretched hand in mine, I read the text that had my girl upset.

From one woman to another, you should know that Owen cheated on his wife while they were married.

Fucking *hell*. Jaw clenched, I pulled the phone from her and checked the number. The D.C. area code had me nearly dialing Tessa and yelling at my ex, but the familiar number wasn't hers. It took a second for it to click, to realize who'd decided to upend my life.

*Goddamn Caroline*. But why?

She'd been disgusted with me when I ran into her at the law firm, but ambushing my girlfriend was a whole other level of scorn. Unless she'd had some urging. I'd stupidly mentioned to Tessa that I'd met someone during our argument. Did she and Caroline have a girls' night out? Relive their rage over glasses of wine? Decide together to ruin my life?

"Owen?" Ainsley's voice was just a whisper, laced with pain. "Why do you look more mad than surprised?"

I tossed her phone on the bed. "It's not true. I swear to God, it's not true."

Her shoulders hunched forward, her breath coming faster. She was in slim black pants, a loose cream top hanging off one shoulder, always stylish and sexy. What wasn't sexy was how she was curling in on herself, looking at me like I was a stranger.

I gestured to my living area. "Can we sit and talk?"

She swallowed, but didn't answer.

"Ainsley, please. I know how this looks, but I can explain."

"God, Owen...did you read that text? I mean, I'm freaking out here. I don't even know what to think." She crossed her arms over her middle as though she might fall apart.

I was furious at Caroline for sending that text, but seeing Ainsley barely holding it together gutted me. My anger leached out. “Tessa thinks I cheated on her, like that text said, but I didn’t. I’ve wanted to tell you, but with your past and everything I was scared to bring it up.”

“So you kept it from me?”

“It was the wrong choice, but I’d decided to tell you tonight. That’s why I asked if we could talk before we made love. Please, just hear me out.”

I couldn’t be sure if it was her remembering me asking her to talk or the reference to us making love, but she finally nodded. I all but collapsed. If I didn’t fix this, I’d lose her. It would serve me right for keeping the details of my divorce secret, but the possibility was acid to my lungs.

Once her feet were tucked under her, both of us facing each other on my couch, I exhaled. “We’d been in a bad place awhile, Tessa and me. Years, really. She’d thrown herself into work, and I’d started volunteering at a Habitat build to escape my job. We rarely saw each other. Hadn’t been intimate in ages.”

I wanted to reach for Ainsley, hold her hand and feel our connection, but her unblinking gaze held me back. Throat thick, I forged on, “You’re the first woman I’ve been with since her. She and I were basically strangers for our last year together, even before that hardly connecting. We fought regularly. It took an eye-opening conversation with a friend to make me realize I wouldn’t be able to love Tessa again, no matter how long I held on, and when I ended things, she kind of...”

I gritted my teeth, remembering the animosity emanating from her that day. “She kind of snapped. She accused me of cheating on her. Refused to accept we were done, that I was leaving her to be on my own, not for someone else. To this day, I have no idea why she thinks I abused her trust. I’m not sure if it’s because we weren’t sleeping together. She’s vague about it, but vehement. She’s never even uttered a woman’s name, whoever she suspects.”

Except Tessa was cagey like that, treating us like we were in court, holding onto her best cards until they would do the most damage.

I couldn't imagine what fable she'd concocted, or what drove her sordid conclusion. In the end, I'd assumed it was her saving face with her friends and at her firm, shifting the blame to me. It still left me uneasy, had my mind back on that SUV outside and her battle-ready glint during our recent fight. Even this stunt reeked of Tessa—using an investigator to find out who I was dating would be child's play for her, securing Ainsley's number a cinch.

None of that mattered, though. And she had nothing left to hold over me. What mattered was Ainsley, the heartbreaking turmoil on her beautiful face.

“That’s a lot to absorb,” she said quietly.

At least she wasn't yelling or running away. I inched closer, dropped my voice lower. “I know. I should have told you, but I was worried. Your ex and the guys you work for—that stuff’s a big deal. I figured you’d get one whiff of this and bolt. And my old friends all believe Tessa. They think I’m a lying sack of shit, which really hurts. That’s who the text was from—I recognized her number. Caroline and I were close before, but I saw her on my trip to D.C., and she ripped into me. I don’t know if she sent that text with Tessa or on her own. Either way, she probably thinks she’s doing you a favor. So it’s all just...” I focused on the stuccoed ceiling, wishing things weren't so damn complicated.

“Owen.”

I couldn't face her yet. Not until I'd said it all. I kept my attention on the off-white divots and craters above our heads. “Thing is, Ainsley, you’ve kind of knocked me off my feet. I’m falling hard for you, but this is me—my shitty life right now. If you can’t trust me after that text and what I’ve said, I understand. You’ve been through a lot. But the real truth, the harder truth, is losing you will hurt like hell.”

I prepared for her to get up, grab her purse, and leave. Instead her fingers threaded through mine. “Look at me.”

Steeling my nerves, I snuck a glance. Indecision flickered in her blue eyes. An unsettled sea. “Did you cheat on your wife?”

“No.” One sure syllable. The only life preserver I had.

She stared at me, unwavering. I couldn’t read a thing. But she held my hand and held my gaze and held my heart in her hands. Then she blinked. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“I don’t like that you lied, and if you’re lying now, I will cut off your nuts in your sleep, but I’m not ready for this to end.”

I didn’t dare ask if that meant she’d be sleeping over. “I’m not lying.”

Her answering grin didn’t reach her eyes. “Then we’re good. Let’s have dinner.”

Her tone was abrupt, her movements purposeful, as though the momentum would keep her together. Her stiffness tore at me.

I needed to prove how much I cared for her. Show her I was a man of my word, faithful and true. I also needed to thaw this fresh ice between us. Her delight at my dancing admission earlier had been a thing of beauty, the way it had lit her up. A flame I could fan. Maybe it was time to pull out my rusty moves and make Ainsley Hall the star of her own Hollywood Musical.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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Three-letter word for the horizontal distance between the eaves and roof ridge.

*Or* your natural instinct when facing the boy who bullied you.

R U N

AINSLEY

Half the fun of meeting the girls at the gym was wearing my favorite white camo Lululemon tights while watching them grunt and sweat from a safe distance.

Gwen dropped her ten-thousand-pound weights. “My shoulders are on fire.”

Rachel finished her umpteenth squat. “My thighs might explode.”

I fixed my ponytail. “I could totally go for a smoothie.”

Gwen rolled her eyes and jumped up and down on a freaking *box*, as a few men snuck lusty glances her way. “Why do you even come here?” She shot the question at me, barely out of breath.

I pointed to my five-pound weights. “I’m practically Super Woman. You should feel my muscles.” Posing like a bodybuilder, I flexed my biceps.

Rachel squeezed them indulgently. “Let’s get that smoothie, Wonder Woman. Gwen can meet us when she’s done showing off.”

Gwen gestured rudely while still jumping on a box like a crazy person.

After a deep gulp of my coconut, pineapple, avocado smoothie, I slumped in my seat. The gym had a few tables nestled beside the juice bar. People hurried by with gym bags slung over their shoulders, occasionally blocking the view of the treadmills and the street beyond the windows. I watched the frenetic movement, slightly detached. Pretty much how I’d felt the past week. The seven days since Owen’s big revelation.

“You seem quiet.” Rachel knocked her smoothie against mine.

I shrugged and kept sipping.

She wrenched my cup from my hand, placed it out of reach, and faced me. “What’s up?”

“Nothing.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

She made an annoyed sound at the back of her throat. “I rarely get to see you these days, which means time is valuable. If you don’t start spilling all your secrets in the next five seconds, I’ll tell Owen you also crushed on the hot chocolatier.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.”

I harrumphed. (Ten-letter word to express dissatisfaction.) But she was right. We didn’t see each other nearly enough, and I’d done nothing but let my emotions fester the past week. Although I’d visited Owen’s apartment twice, our time together had been heavy. Thick with unspoken tension, weighing down our previously light banter.

We still couldn't keep our hands off each other, and I'd let myself enjoy flipping through a magazine while my construction hunk massaged my feet, lavishing me with attention. Like he couldn't do enough to prove his affection. Still, we'd avoid any and all topics involving his divorce and the details he'd withheld. There had also been a few nights where I'd texted him, but he hadn't replied until much later. Unusual behavior for him.

It was likely him feeding off my distance, but familiar anxiety knotted my belly. Maybe he was lying to me. Seeing someone else.

I needed to get my head together before I lost my mind.

My clutch purse was beside me. I fiddled with the zipper. "Do you know Owen's wife is accusing him of cheating?"

Rachel pressed her hand to her mouth. "*God*, no. I wonder if Jimmy knows."

I waved a dismissive hand. "I'm pretty sure it's all a fabrication. At least, that's what Owen says. That his ex is spreading lies. I mean, you should have seen him when he told me. He looked so defeated. I knew he was in the middle of a messy divorce, but she sounds like a nasty bitch."

Rachel leaned forward to get a clearer view of my face. "Do you believe him?"

*Zip. Zip. Zip.* I fiddled with my purse zipper as the background pop tunes chased my anxiety. There was no denying how he'd tried to tell me something important that night. I'd pushed him to relax instead, unwind. And his regret when confessing to me had been potent. But if he hadn't opened up about this, there could be more he was hiding.

"I think so," I said, clinging to Owen's best qualities, too many to name. He really had been distraught when talking that night.

"And how do you feel about him? Are things serious?"

The skittering of my heart said it all. "I love spending time with him, laughing and talking, and the sex is out of this world. Everything is just...easy." And there's that thing I

couldn't describe—how one glance from him lit me up into a ball of energy.

She plunked my drink back in front of me like it was a double vodka on the rocks. “If he hurts you, I will drive over his nuts with my motorcycle.”

“I already told him I'd cut them off. And when did you get a motorcycle?”

“Jimmy got it for me. It's way too much, and I tried to refuse it, but I couldn't rain on his parade. It even has sun rays painted on the tank.”

Sun rays for his ray of sunshine. An adorable nickname for my adorable friend. “You picked a winner with that one.”

“I sure did. But back to Owen. You say you believe him, but you seem wary.”

“I *do* believe him, but my trust engine is running on empty. I keep replaying how clueless I was about Brandon, how foolish I felt afterward, then I hit meltdown mode.” I was too drained to relive how horrifying it had been to get Caroline's text, how it still plagued me with doubts. But so much about Owen contradicted her claim, and I was too invested to walk away.

As Rachel made a clucking sound of compassion, my phone buzzed. I pulled it from my purse, my heart fluttering at the sight of Owen's name. No matter my turmoil, a simple text from him turned me back into a swoopy mop.

Owen: Jimmy and Rachel are in town. Let's all go out tomorrow.

I glanced at my friend to find her grinning at her phone, too. “You just get the same date request?”

“Is that cool? Or are things too weird right now?”

I stared at my phone. My gut told me it was what I needed: to go out with Owen and my friends and forget my nerves. I'd offered him my trust, accepting his version of the truth, so I either had to put the incident behind me...or I had to end things.

The latter riddled me with more anxiety, which meant it was time to forge ahead. Stop allowing my past to mess with my mind.

Come to think of it, there was another thing I could do to suss out Owen's intentions. My father had never liked Brandon. He'd been polite to him, but my dad was a cuddly teddy bear—a six-foot-five, tattooed teddy bear. For him, not liking someone meant no close hugs or bromance back slaps. Worried he'd upset me, he'd never mentioned his distrust of Brandon until we'd broken up. My sweet father felt partly responsible for the fallout.

Me: Sounds great. We'll bring Gwen if she's free. Maybe invite Emmett? And I have a request.

Owen: Anything.

There was no hesitation in his reply. No concern over what I might ask. He really was the sweetest guy. A guy I could picture in my future, if I let my mind wander down that rose-colored road. Hopefully watching him with my father and my family would give me clarity.

Me: Come to dinner with me before we go out, with my family.

I tried to have a monthly Friday night dinner at home, but six weeks later, life had gotten in the way.

Owen: I like the sound of that. Mind doing me a favor too?

Cheeky bugger. But I warmed at his quick acceptance to meet my parents.

Me: Depends.

Owen: Come to the build tomorrow. Talk to Anton. No matter how it goes, I'm here for you.

My brief optimism disappeared faster than last season's horrific culottes trend. My neck prickled. A rock formed in my

gut. There was no doubt the other thing fueling my recent dark mood had been my inability to muster an apology to Anton. I was afraid of facing the boy who'd ridiculed me. I was afraid of facing what *I'd* done to him in return.

I replied *Maybe* as Gwen joined us.

"That was an awesome workout."

I pulled out a chair for her. "You say that every time." Even after Step Class Hell. "How are things with your mom?"

She swiped a towel over her forehead, then hung it around her neck. "Not good. Chemo doesn't seem to be helping, and doctors wear that bad-news frown when they talk to her."

Rachel and I exchanged worried glances. She reached over the table to hold Gwen's hand. "How are *you*?"

"Also not good. I've tried to spend time with her, but we usually end up fighting. It's like me being there is making things worse. I'm going to take a break."

"You sure that's smart?" Rachel asked.

"I have zero clue what's smart right now. All I keep focusing on is the fact that she's going to die before she tells me who my father is. I brought it up last time, and our fight was pretty epic. We both need space, I think."

Whatever my relationship and life stress, it was peanuts compared to this. "We're going out tomorrow, with the guys and maybe Owen's brother. You should come. We can ply Rachel with wine until she gets on the dance floor and embarrasses herself."

Gwen snickered. "I wouldn't miss that for the world."

Somehow she perked up and chatted about her next death-defying stunt—rock climbing *sans* rope.

I once asked her why she tempted fate by jumping from planes and the like. Her reply: *Scaring myself makes me feel alive*. In the face of her mother's illness, she was still scaring herself. Still living, careening into the void. Dating Owen and ignoring that slanderous text certainly scared me, but confronting Anton also sent me into panic mode. I may never

test my limits the way Gwen barreled through hers, but it was time to take control of my life. Facing my past seemed like a good place to start.



I'd skipped out on this week's volunteering sessions. Although I didn't have the willpower to turn down Owen's evening invitations, I'd studiously avoided him during the day, as though the sunlight would expose my nervous energy and he'd tire of my hot-and-cold routine. With tonight's ambush on the horizon, the notion was less unsettling, and it was nice to be back.

The familiar hustle and bustle of the Habitat build had me smiling: hammers pounded, saws whirred, voices shouted instructions and questions. I didn't spot Owen or Anton right away, but a handful of students were sitting on scaffolding, paintbrushes in hand, as they joked and painted window frames.

The first six townhomes were nearing completion, another six rising from the ground. Pride puffed up my chest at the sight.

Then a red-headed man slid into my peripheral vision, and my pride went *splat*.

Anton was talking with two girls, both teens grimacing. He was too far to see his scarred hand, but his arms cut stern lines as he spoke, maybe reprimanding them. The girls then faced each other, hips jutted out with attitude, as though they were forcing out insincere apologies.

If I could write thought bubbles above their heads, they would read:

“Sorry.”

“Whatever.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

The depths of teenage sincerity.

The two trudged off toward the build, and Anton rubbed his eyes, clearly exhausted. He didn't look like the guy who'd laughed as I'd stumbled, terrified, out of the walk-in fridge, or the villain who'd hissed *stupid bitch* when I'd forget to put a second tomato on a Chucky's Chicken Sandwich. But he did have a limp from the mean prank I'd pulled, a slight drag of his right leg.

I contemplated scuttling back to my apartment and hiding in the dark for the rest of the day. Never showing my face onsite again. But I'd made a bold wish to better myself, which meant doing more than Habitat work.

Yes, Anton had been a dick. Yes, he had tormented me. But this was about acknowledging the cruel thing I'd done, provoked or not. Not hiding. Not pretending volunteering made it all better.

This was my trial, and I was as guilty as Anton.

He hadn't moved, likely enjoying a breather from his students. I chanted a series of yoga *oms*, searching for serenity. I'd been out scoping stores this morning and was still in my Donna Karan jersey dress and ankle boots. That left me dressier than I'd have liked for this encounter. The exact thing Anton had teased me about all those years ago.

At least my walk of shame would be fashionable.

I forced my spine straight, determined to face the music. (The soundtrack to *Jaws*, specifically.) I navigated the uneven ground until Anton was a foot away. Close enough that I could glimpse red, puckered skin on his right hand. His attention cut to me, maybe sensing my horrified stare. His eyes widened behind his glasses. Then they narrowed, slicing me down at my wobbly knees.

His stance slammed from relaxed to rigid. "Ainsley Hall."

I offered a timid wave. "That's me."

He stared. I cowered. Around us, the earth continued its slothful spin.

I was a breath from doing my fiercest runway walk away from there, but I'd come for a reason. There was no changing the prank I'd pulled. Nothing could undo the physical harm I'd caused. It was time to accept my punishment.

"I've been volunteering here and noticed you a while back, but was too cowardly to approach you." I cleared my throat twice. "Thing is, I was the one who left you the cockroach box. You weren't exactly nice to me, but there's no excusing what I did. And I don't expect you to accept my apology. I'm still sorry. You didn't deserve to get hurt."

His face glazed over like an unimpressed wax statue, but my heart was a battering ram. I couldn't tell if his blank expression was born of repressed anger or arrogance. He'd exhibited both as a teen.

He scratched his red hair, a move that put his burned hand in full view. "Are you done?"

If he'd let me apologize ten thousand times over, I would. "I guess. I've just always felt sick about it. Maybe knowing it's haunted me will make you feel marginally better." I didn't guilt *him* for what he'd done, or offer my sob story about working too many hours back then and struggling to keep my head above water while paying my family's bills. How it had all compounded with his cruelty, culminating in my cowardly act.

There was no justifying my actions.

"Good," he said, "because I'm the one who should be apologizing."

It was my turn to become a statue. As awful as he'd been, he'd never shown a lick of remorse. I hadn't hoped for it now. "You should?"

He watched his students a moment, then stared at his boots. "My father was a drunk—the nasty, abusive kind—and I took that out on you. You were an easy target, I guess. I'm ashamed about it, to this day. So, yeah...I should be the one apologizing. And thanking you. The cockroach stunt woke me up."

“But the scars...”

He held up his hand and smirked. “They’re kind of badass, and they remind me what’s important. I don’t tolerate bullying in my classes. If I even get a whiff of it, I come down hard on the kids.”

One of the moody teenage girls called, “Mr. Bickley!”

Anton raised a finger to tell her he’d be a minute. “Anyway, I’m sorry for everything I did. That fridge stunt especially. You tried your best at work, and I was a prick.”

“You’re forgiven,” I said quickly, happy to say the words, thrilled to put this chapter of my life to bed. I wouldn’t be sending him a friend request or swapping phone numbers, but grudges were poison. “Consider us non-enemies.”

He smiled sadly. “Non-enemies sounds pretty great. See you around the build.”

He joined his students, and I stood a moment, letting the reality of our conversation sink in. Shame still weighted me, but I felt light, too. Relieved the confrontation was over.

“How’d it go?”

I swiveled at Owen’s sexy baritone, teetering like I had the first time we’d met. Muddy ground and high fashion were not a good combo. “When did you turn up?”

He slid his arm around my waist, anchoring me. “I saw you talking with Anton and waited until he left.” His voice softened. “So?”

*So*, I faced my nemesis and apologized. *So*, I was still standing. “We both said what we needed to say, and he doesn’t blame me for what I did. He actually thanked me, which is odd.”

Pensive, Owen looked in Anton’s direction. “How do you feel?”

Naming this riot of emotions was as easy as choosing one item at a Sephora sale. “Like I’ve been riding the Gravitron ride Gwen once forced Rachel and me on—exhilarated and nauseated. But I also feel badly.”

Owen was in his usual work attire—worn jeans, gray T-shirt accentuating his broad chest, thick sandy hair askew from his hardhat. Untold tenderness warmed his eyes. “I don’t follow.”

“Apparently Anton was living with an abusive father back then. If I’d tried to understand him more, maybe I could have talked to him. Helped. But I was too wrapped up in my emotions to see beyond his pranks.”

A sharp look crossed Owen’s face, his features tightening.

My lungs constricted. “Do you think I messed up? That I should have done something?”

“Babe, no.” He shook his head vehemently. “Nothing like that. Teenagers are ruled by their emotions, and he was awful to you. I’d have done worse than a box of roaches. It just made me think of something else. But I’m happy you’ve found closure.”

I *had* found relief. As well as an idea.

Facing Anton had triggered a thought, a way to alter the focus of my current job situation. He’d found strength from my mean stunt, had used it to better himself. The way some women reinvented themselves after a nasty divorce. If I worked with women instead of men, people wanting to redefine their lives after a separation, I could make a difference. Help them find strength on their own.

Letting that notion marinate, I pressed to my tiptoes and pulled Owen down for a soft kiss. Someone wolf whistled, and I smiled against his lips. “We could give them a real show.”

“Nick would have a heart attack.” Another chaste kiss later, he said, “Looking forward to the club tonight. Emmett can’t come, but I’m excited to meet your friends...and your folks.”

Suddenly, so was I. Confronting my past-self had set my emotions awhirl. *All* my emotions.

I may have avoided sleeping at Owen’s place, had kept him at a healthy distance this past week, but pretending my heart wasn’t invested in him was foolishness. He’d pushed me

to face my fear today, promising support no matter the outcome. He'd incorporated my vegan lifestyle into his, stocking his fridge with foods I liked. My man touched me whenever he was near, soft brushes that said: *you're mine, I'm yours, we're better together.*

He also fucked like a god.

The implications settled on me, just how hard I'd fallen for him. My father's opinion was still important, but I couldn't rely on him to confirm Owen's honesty. I had to take this plunge on my own and hope for the best.

A first step to stop dwelling on what-ifs could be having some enjoyment at Owen's expense. Watching him sweat while he feared for his life under my father's intimidating presence would be gold. He didn't know Mason Hall looked like a Hells Angels biker. He didn't have a clue Dad's tough exterior didn't match his gooey center.

My father and I had played this game before: the Make My Boyfriend Wet Himself game. I nearly released an evil *bwahahaha* laugh at the image. This was going to be some kind of fun.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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Four-letter word for the curved drain that prevents sewer gases from escaping.

*Or when your girlfriend sics her scary father on you for her own amusement.*

T R A P

OWEN

I stared at the e-mail I'd written to Summer, at the cursor blinking at the bottom of the page, wondering if it was smart to hit Send. I hadn't spoken with her since our days on the D.C. Habitat build. More specifically, since I'd punched her husband in the face.

I reread my message:

*Not sure if you want to hear from me, but I'm struggling with some stuff, and you always helped me figure things out in the past. If you're around and can talk, let me know.*

Ainsley's comment this afternoon, as innocent as it was, had knocked my scattered thoughts further askew. My last meeting (argument) with Tessa had been sitting with me, too. *You hear what you want to hear*, she'd said. Then Ainsley

today, upset she'd been too wrapped up in her emotions to see what Anton had gone through as a teen.

I was beyond proud of her for finally facing her past, but her realization hit home. Maybe I wasn't seeing my past with Tessa clearly, either. I just didn't know how to sift through it all.

I flicked the mouse until it hovered over the Send button, paused, then clicked the damn thing, hoping I wasn't about to stir a hornet's nest. I didn't know if Summer had forgiven me for hitting her husband, but I didn't regret the impulse. I'd also never forget how that day had changed my life.

We'd both been struggling in our marriages and started sharing our woes at some point. At the time, she was the only one in my life who understood what I was going through. When our volunteer shifts overlapped, we'd commiserate. Then one day she got something in her eye.

Her chin had trembled as I leaned over her to carefully remove the wood particle. The second it was out, her tears spilled over and she collapsed into me. "He cheated," she'd said against my chest. "I saw a text and confronted him this morning, and... *God*, he cheated."

I held her and listened, all the while wanting to pummel the asshole. But it was her next comment that sucked the wind right out of me. "I still love him. I'm more afraid of losing him than forgiving him."

In that moment, I realized I had to let Tessa go. The love Summer still had for her husband had been palpable, even in the face of what he'd done, something I hadn't felt in years, if ever. Something I knew I'd never get back. Tessa and I both deserved better. So I'd wiped Summer's tears and kissed her cheek and told her to fight for her man, if that was what she wanted. What I shouldn't have done was punch him when he turned up that afternoon.

Now I was reaching out to her, seeking advice from the woman whose worst moment had given me clarity.

Her reply came swiftly: *I'm around now and would love to catch up. Send me your number.*

Relieved at her positive tone, I sent it off. My phone rang moments later.

“Summer Daniels.”

“Owen Phillips. This is a pleasant surprise.”

I bounced my heel. “Wasn’t sure it would be after what I did.”

Her laugh drifted through the line. “That day was nuts. But seeing you punch Mike in the face was a highlight back then.”

I flexed my hand, as though it still throbbed. “Felt pretty good, considering. How are you?”

She paused, and I leaned back in my chair, spinning the pen on my desk. It was nice to hear her voice. The familiarity sucked time into a vacuum, like we’d never lost our friendship.

“I imagine you’re asking if I’m still with Mike, and the answer is yes. We moved past what he did, with a crapload of therapy, but things are really good.”

Not sure I had it in me to forgive a spouse that kind of betrayal, but if there was one thing my disastrous marriage had taught me, it was that there was no judging other relationships. We weren’t privy to what happened behind closed doors. “Glad to hear it. I know you wanted to make it work.”

“It’s not all smooth sailing, and the distrust creeps up from time to time, but we both put in the effort we deserve now. What’s going on with you? Why’d you reach out?”

Summer had always been a straight shooter. It was one of the reasons we got along so well. “I left Tessa shortly after the last day I saw you, and things have been...rough.”

I launched into the whole mess: the cheating scandal that never happened, losing my friends, the divorce from hell, meeting Ainsley. The last bit came out soft and low, words I wanted to sink into.

“You sound smitten.”

“Yeah.” Even thinking about Ainsley had my stress ebbing. “But I need to end this standoff with Tessa if I want things to move forward with us. I didn’t cheat on Tessa, but she thinks I did. Since you got past what happened with Mike, any chance you have advice on how to handle things?”

The sound of clanging bit out, then, “Sorry. Trying to cook a late dinner.” More noises filled the pause. “Okay. The thing about Mike’s affair was, it wasn’t the cause of our problems; it was the effect. We’d drifted, as you know. We had money issues and his father had passed away, and a thousand other stupid things piled on until we didn’t recognize each other. He knows if he ever cheats again, I’ll be gone faster than he can blink, but I believed in us and wasn’t ready to let go. Getting past what he did was about us *both* owning our part in the cause. So I guess the question is, have you done that? Have you apologized to Tessa? Have you taken ownership of your part in things?”

My heel was restless again, bouncing in time to my agitated thoughts. Tessa held a solid portion of the blame for our failed marriage. For years, I’d blamed her for it all:

Tessa didn’t want kids.

Tessa chose work over me.

Tessa cared more about money than love.

Then came her accusations, and my anger had blocked out the rest, including my role in our collapse. I hadn’t been able to focus on much besides my resentment and hurt. I would cast blame, and she’d bite back, an unending circle of animosity. Never once had I said I was sorry.

The more I spun the idea, the more it made sense. This was the wrench in our divorce.

I’d never accepted my blame.

“Summer, you’re a genius.”

“I try. Look, I’ve gotta go, but I’d also like to apologize.”

“For what?”

“I meant to get in touch after the last day I saw you, but Mike assumed you and I were seeing each other. That’s why he thought you hit him.”

A wave of guilt rocked me. “I’m sorry if I made things worse.”

“Don’t be. Like I said, seeing that made me feel better, and he knows the truth now. But things were too fragile then to reach out to you, and time went on...”

“Don’t think twice about it. I never messaged you, either. But it’s nice to reconnect.”

“It is. Don’t be a stranger.”

We hung up, and I stared at my phone. When Tessa had first accused me of stepping out on her, I’d racked my brain, trying to figure out why she’d thought I’d cheated and who she’d believed I’d been seeing. Summer had come to mind briefly, but we’d never gotten together outside the build, never talked on the phone. Tonight was the first time I’d even sent her an e-mail. It hadn’t made sense, nor did any other acquaintance I’d had at the time.

Unless Summer’s husband had said something to Tessa. Found out who I was married to and tried to start trouble.

If so, nothing to be done about it now. Now was the time to shoulder my side of the blame for my failed marriage. Sift through my actions and offer my own apology.

I kept my e-mail to Tessa short:

*You were right that I only heard what I wanted when it came to us. There are things I’ve realized about our relationship, things you deserve to hear that I never said. It’s time we talk instead of fight. I’d like to meet in person.*

I steered clear of her crude accusations, Caroline’s damaging text, and any divorce talk. I’d sent plenty of angry messages in the past. This was a new tactic. A last-ditch effort to find acceptance so we could both make peace.

I hit Send, then glanced at the clock. Ainsley would be here in half an hour. Her folks lived in a nearby suburb, so I offered to drive, suggesting she leave her car at my place. It would allow her to relax with her friends. Plus, if she drank too much, I wouldn't let her drive home. A prick move maybe, looking for any excuse to have her stay over, but I was greedy to sleep with her warm body tucked into mine. I wanted to wake her up with my mouth between her thighs, the best kind of breakfast in bed.

I got ready, nerves emerging as I dressed. She didn't know I'd taken private ballroom classes this week, preparing for tonight's clubbing afterward. I'd hated missing her texts, but dusting off my dancing skills so I could woo my girl had been more important. *Showing* her how much she meant to me was more important.

As long as I didn't trip over myself and blank on the steps.

By the time she arrived, I was fumbling while trying to tie my goddamn shoes, but one glimpse of my blond bombshell dispelled my nerves. Her golden hair fell around her shoulders, mile-high heels adding a sway to her step. Her purple dress was something from *The Great Gatsby*—shiny on the top half, fringed on the bottom. Sexy as sin. The sight made me happy I wore a vest with my slacks and dress shirt. I couldn't wait to spin her around a dance floor.

I clasped her fingers and kissed the back of her hand. "You're beautiful."

Her gaze slid down my body. "You're not so bad yourself. Love your shoes."

The black-and-white wingtips would hopefully serve me well when waltzing.

We didn't talk much on the drive, but the tension between us had thinned. Odd how silence had so many decibels, this one ringing with comfort.

Ainsley touched my thigh, and I covered her hand with mine, gathering her fingers in my grasp. I wanted to pull to the side of the road and kiss her senseless. I kept my foot on the

gas. She gave me directions, seeming a bit fidgety on her seat, but not with unease. I sensed some kind of excitement, hopefully the idea of me meeting her family. If so, it meant she was finding it in her heart to trust me wholly. The notion made me pleased as hell.

Until I parked on her street.

Her white house was small and nondescript, the neighborhood a bit worse for wear. Some lawns were overgrown, others tended. Nothing was odd or out of place, except for the massive tattooed man leaning on her door frame. His thick arms were crossed over a Lynyrd Skynyrd T-shirt, bold ink splashed up his exposed skin, even his neck. His shaved head gave him a sinister look, and his thick blond beard accentuated the death glare launched our way.

I kept my hands on the steering wheel, ready to peel away if necessary. “Are you expecting someone else for dinner?”

Ainsley was all smiles. “Nope. That’s my dad. My brother, Jason, should be here soonish.”

“Your *dad*?”

“Don’t worry. I had him lock up his guns. He’s a pussycat, as long as he likes you.”

My balls ran for cover while she hopped out of my truck and practically leapt at the intimidating giant. He lifted her up and flung her through the air.

I struggled to swallow.

Once inside the house, Mason Hall was even more intimidating. He nearly crushed my hand when he shook it, his steely appraisal unrelenting. Ainsley’s mother was a different story. Colleen was as petite as her daughter, rounder curves, her blue eyes tired but warm. She fussed over Ainsley. “Your dress is lovely. Something new?”

Ainsley twirled and the bottom fringe fanned in a circle. “Found it at a vintage shop. Owen likes old movies, so I thought it would be fun.”

The admission hit me square in my chest. I reached for her waist, to pull her closer, but Mason's scowl deepened. I froze and dropped my arm.

"I understand you just moved back to town, Owen." Mason growled more than spoke, his voice its own force of nature.

The women drifted into the kitchen, leaving me in the living room to fend for myself. The walls were a light yellow, a few family photos and dried flowers on a mantel above a brick fireplace. There was even a framed ballet poster over their brown couch. Mason Hall looked more of a brute in the slightly feminine space.

I cleared my throat. "I did, sir. I was living in D.C., but spent my teen years in San Francisco. I wanted to come back, be closer to my brother and grandmother." Unsure whether to cross my arms or let them hang, I shoved my hands into my front pockets.

"And you were married there?"

I bristled at the question, hadn't expected Ainsley to discuss my history with her father. Not that I had anything to be ashamed of, but his glower darkened with each passing second. "I was married for eight years. We got together young, and it didn't work out."

"So now you're dating around, making up for lost time?"

Jesus fucking left field. "*No*. Now I'm volunteering at a Habitat for Humanity build, which is where I happened to meet your daughter. I wanted to contribute to the community while I figured things out." It was bad enough Mason thought I was a player. I didn't need him assuming I was a deadbeat, too.

He didn't invite me to sit, didn't make a move to be polite. "Sounds pretty convenient to me."

I widened my stance and scanned the room for those guns Ainsley had mentioned. "I don't have an agenda, sir. Coming home was a way for me to start fresh."

"Not with my daughter, I hope."

“Excuse me?”

“I know how beautiful my girl is. Know men see her as a prize. You won’t be the first I run off, and you won’t be the last. Ainsley deserves the world.”

We were in agreement there, and I had every intention of giving her just that. But he was about to get an earful. “All due respect, sir, I care for Ainsley a great deal. She *is* beautiful, but she’s also smart and funny as hell, and I don’t plan on letting her go, unless she doesn’t want to be with me. But that’s her decision to make, not yours.”

A glimmer lit his gray eyes, a hint of...amusement? Then he cracked his knuckles. The ink on his forearms came into view: Ainsley’s portrait beamed at me. This man was definitely devoted to his daughter.

The front door pushed open before he could pound me to a pulp, probably the other sibling joining us for this Cleaver Family Meal. Jason stopped at the threshold to the living room, assessing us with curiosity. “You must be Owen. I’m Jason, the better-looking sibling.”

“Nice to meet you.” His full cheeks reminded me of our chipmunk, Lucifer, but Jason was far from ornery. He had a bit of hipster to him with his plaid shirt and skinny jeans, grinning wide as his attention flitted between Mason and me.

Mason didn’t move to greet his son. Not so much as a pleantry offered. My girlfriend’s father pulled up to his full height and stepped toward me. Christ, the man was scary. Jason’s grin faded as he surveyed our mounting intensity.

Then he laughed.

Howling, he tossed his head back and smacked his thigh. Mason’s lips twitched, a muffled snort escaping. I stood, baffled.

When Jason recovered, he slapped my back. “She’s screwing with you, man. Dad’s a total wimp.”

What in the ever loving...?

Mason laughed outright, a guttural chuckle that bowled through the tension-filled room. “Sorry, but I can’t say no to my girl. Even when she asks me to scare her boyfriends.”

Ainsley stomped into the room and glared at her brother. “You ruined it. Dad hadn’t even told him about the shallow graves yet.”

Still on edge, I scrubbed a hand over my locked jaw. “Shallow graves?”

Mason planted his large mitt on my shoulder, leaning down close. “The ones out back, when the boyfriends get outta line.” He blew out another snort, his shoulders shaking with humor. He tipped his head to me. “You did better than most. Nice to meet a man who’ll stand up for himself.” He regarded his daughter, a lifetime of fondness in his eyes. “Love you, princess.”

Reeling from Mason’s inquisition and chiding afterward, I hadn’t quite found my feet, but the affection in the house began to set me right. They traded hugs and good-natured jokes. I didn’t sense the irritation that lingered at some family gatherings. As hard as Ainsley’s childhood had been, as much responsibility as she shouldered now, caring for her folks, there was no doubt she’d always been loved.

I stalked toward her, giving her my best playful glare. “You’re in trouble.”

Her eyes sparked with delight. “Punish me later,” she whispered.

I’d be doing that and so much more.

Dinner really was a Cleaver Family Affair. Mason and Colleen teased Ainsley about her childhood Barbie fashion shows. They razzed Jason for having glued a piece of his model airplane to his chin. Vegan lasagna was devoured as Mason asked earnestly about my woodworking. Pride swamped me when Ainsley jumped in to praise my work.

I found myself staring at her across the table, losing trail of the banter, getting lost in her bright cheeks and easy manner. I even caught Mason watching me thoughtfully a couple times.

Although no longer worried I'd be having a conversation with his fist, his attention was probing. Based on the closeness between him and his daughter, I'd guess he knew about Ainsley's ex. The cheating. How it had crushed her. I'd bet he was wondering if I'd hurt his daughter, too.

"I have an announcement." Mason tossed his napkin on his empty plate. He shared a tender glance with his wife, both clearly pleased about something.

Ainsley perked up, clueing into whatever I was missing. "Oh my God. Did something come through?"

Jason smacked the table in approval. "It was only a matter of time."

"I got hired at the Tesla plant. Another job opened up. Starts next week."

Ainsley squealed and hurried around the table, the four of them celebrating with laughs and more hugs. I sat back and soaked in their joy.

This was what I wanted one day, a family of my own. Accomplishments reveled, jokes shared, stories about Barbies and Super Glue remembered. I wanted stability and love, and I wanted it with Ainsley. I knew it in the deep ache anchoring my chest, the way my eyes followed her like a magnet. She was all I could see.

Shortly, she announced we had to meet our friends, not before we checked on the newly drywalled master bedroom—the work Ainsley had paid for but had lied about. I fell harder for her, watching her fuss over her tattooed father, who was wrapped around her finger. I couldn't count how many times he'd called her princess and had planted a kiss on the top of her head.

When her parents walked us to the door, Mason surprised me by pulling me into a hug. "Treat her nice," he said so only I could hear.

My throat tightened. I'd never had a father, let alone one whose world revolved around my happiness. I pounded his back. "Like a princess."

He released me, and Ainsley stood there, blinking rapidly—as though she might cry.

Once I had her buckled into her side of the truck, I trailed a finger along her jaw. “You okay?”

Still glassy eyed, she nodded. “Perfect.”

I leaned down, stole a slow kiss, then gave her a wink. “Not perfect yet, doll. The night’s just begun.”



I’d visited The Scarlet Lounge yesterday and had cringed at the sight of the stark club in daylight. The cavernous space, worn couches, and nicked bar top weren’t the backdrops I’d imagined for my romantic gesture, but it was where the girls wanted to go, so I’d powered on and had asked the owner for a favor.

Tonight the venue was ablaze with warm spotlights. A disco ball spun over couples and groups dancing. Others talked and flirted in clusters.

I placed my hand on Ainsley’s lower back as we met the girls and Jimmy at the raised bar. Introductions were passed around, drinks ordered. Conversation flowed easily as our worlds merged. Hanging out as a group was fun...even when she gave them the play-by-play of her prank, at my expense. She could tease me endlessly for all I cared. I couldn’t keep my attention from flitting to her beaming smile, her bright eyes.

Her quiet affection toward me.

Rachel placed her hand over her heart and said something I couldn’t hear. “Sorry, what?”

She leaned closer and yelled, “You guys are so cute. I can’t believe you’re together.”

In agreement, I squeezed Ainsley’s hip. She pressed into me.

Gwen plucked the olive from her martini skewer and tossed it into her mouth. “The loud music and yelling reminds me of the night we first met Jimmy.”

Rachel froze mid-sip of her wine. “Don’t you dare repeat that story.”

Jimmy was leaning on the bar, his shaggy hair and inked arms probably intimidating to strangers, like Mason’s rough exterior had been. But my old friend was as solid as they came.

He wrapped his free arm around his girl. “Don’t be embarrassed, Sunshine. I love that story.” He nosed her ear and kissed her softly. “It was the best night of my life.”

Rachel shrugged, feigning boredom. “If only I could remember it.”

That sent them on a stroll down memory lane, the couple touching and joking about an alcohol-fueled one-night stand that turned into anything but. They were ridiculously in love. It made me want to hold Ainsley closer, have her pressed against me, under me, surrounding me.

“Speaking of wild nights one can’t remember,” she said, mischief in her voice, “Owen got his ass tattooed and has no idea what the Japanese words mean.”

Gwen nearly coughing up her drink. “Can I see it?”

Ainsley went to answer, but I covered her face with my hand. “Not a chance. In fact, Ainsley made it up. She was hallucinating when we were stuck in a room.”

“Whatever.” Gwen eyed my belt buckle. “One night I’ll get you drunk and pull down your pants.”

Ainsley licked my hand, and I yanked it away, grinning.

“We’ll tag team him,” my traitorous girlfriend said. “It’s hilarious.”

Rachel raised her hand. “I’ll help.”

Jimmy crossed his arms, chuckling. “Can’t wait to tell the guys at soccer.”

These comedians. “You’re all dead to me. And you...” I pulled Ainsley in front of me, her back to my chest, my arms secure around her. “That’s twice tonight you’ve embarrassed me. I might need to spend more time with your folks, find out some dirt on you.”

“You don’t scare me, cowboy. Or should I call you Sinatra? Your outfit is a perfect throwback.”

There was a time joking about my tendency to embody different personalities would have chafed. A reminder I used to search for stories that weren’t mine. Any tale but that of being the second-hand kid abandoned by his mother, the teenager who’d been unsure what kind of man he should be.

I still valued the manners cowboys like my old boss, Bill, had inspired. I’d never tire of losing myself in a classic musical, watching love conquer all. But I liked who I’d become, an amalgamation of these experiences. Especially with Ainsley as my leading lady.

The music shifted, some remixed pop song that had the girls squealing. Gwen and Rachel snatched Ainsley from my grasp and disappeared into the crush of bodies on the dance floor. I settled against the bar, next to Jimmy. A glance at my watch told me my song would be on in fifteen minutes or so, and my stomach bottomed out. This was probably a stupid idea. There were a couple hundred people here, easy.

My lessons this week had been good. Irina was a great teacher, keeping things light and fun as she reinforced the basics I’d learned as a kid. But there’d been no audience those nights, no friends to laugh at us, no woman I’d been hoping to impress.

I took a lengthy pull on my beer.

“Looking kind of green,” Jimmy said.

“Might have done something dumb.”

“Care to share?”

“You’ll know soon enough.”

He didn't push, and I searched for the girls but couldn't find them in the growing crowd.

"Where's Emmett?" Jimmy asked.

I finished my beer and plunked it down. "No idea. I asked him to come tonight, but he was moody. Could barely get a word out of him."

"Did he end up dating Cameron?"

"Not sure. Why?"

He sipped his wine. "I was at The Blue Door last night, and Cameron seemed... subdued. I asked what was up. He said something about falling for the wrong guy, but I didn't know if that was your brother."

The intel gave me pause. Emmett was generally upbeat. Having him blow me off earlier hinted at something being wrong, but I'd had a dance to focus on and a dinner date with Ainsley's family looming. No time to force him to talk. I added that to my to-do list, along with convincing Tessa to wrap up our divorce, telling Ainsley I was madly in love with her without scaring her off, and getting my woodworking business off the ground. Piece of cake.

I searched for the girls again, still no luck, but my phone buzzed. An email from Tessa greeted me: *Talking sounds good. Why don't I come to you this time? I'm free in a couple weeks.*

I'd consider that a win. I replied for her to pick the time and day, then I caught sight of the girls. A couple douchebags were dancing too close, moving closer. Jimmy kicked off the bar, face darkening as he zeroed in on the same scene. Before we could make a move, Ainsley flipped around and said something to the tallest man. I was no lip reader, but there was no mistaking her sass and bite as the men raised their hands and slinked off.

Hot *and* badass—that was my girl.

"She's awesome," Jimmy said.

"I know, man. I know."

The music shifted then, the song I'd asked the owner to play strumming through the sound system. The dancing ceased, people unsure what to make of the mellow tune. Heart in my throat, I strutted toward Ainsley as the opening notes to Lighthouse's "You and Me" blanketed the room.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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Fifteen letters for the interlocking ridges and grooves that join adjacent wood boards.

*Or* when your boyfriend busts out his inner Fred Astaire and sweeps you off your feet.

### TONGUE AND GROOVE

AINSLEY

My face felt flush, my armpits a tad dewier than ideal in my vintage dress, but totally worth it after dancing with the girls. I also wasn't ready to call it quits. But the funky pop mix blended into a romantic song. The kind of music that had me wanting to close my eyes and sink into my lover's arms. Not Rachel's or Gwen's arms.

A tap on my back had my shoulders bunching toward my ears. Some players didn't know how to take no for an answer. They also didn't know who they were dealing with. Evil glare in place, I swiveled. "You must not value your nuts, assho—"

Except he wasn't an asshole. He was Owen.

Bent forward at the waist, my charmer extended a hand in invitation. "May I have this dance?"

A small circle had formed around us, my friends looking like walking emojis with their heart eyes popping out. All I could do was stare. At Owen. I still couldn't get over how

handsome he was in his white dress shirt, black vest and slacks tailored to his fine physique, those wing-tipped shoes pushing him from hot to hotter.

The Rat Pack had a new member.

I should have crowed *yes* on the spot, fallen into his inviting embrace. Instead I said, “If I have to lift my arms while dancing, I might clear half the room.”

Not giving me a choice, he invaded my space. He placed one of my hands on his solid shoulder, the other in his outstretched hand. “You smell beautiful. You look beautiful. And you’re going to dance with me, doll.”

My breathy “Okay” was barely out when we began to move. Our first few steps were awkward. His body was stiff. My limbs were as graceful as a hippo’s. All my ballet training disappeared in a whoosh. He tried to guide us to the left, but my instincts led me toward the right.

I cringed. “Shoot.”

“Sorry.”

“Sorry.”

“Oof.” He winced as I stepped on his toe. He tightened his hold on me, and whispered, “Let me lead, Ainsley. I got you.”

Fred and Ginger we were not, but my lack of coordination wasn’t because we were dancing our first dance in front of strangers. I just had to relax. Quit trying to halt the natural flow of our rhythm, exactly how’d I’d behaved in our relationship, stressing about Caroline’s text and all the ways Owen could hurt me.

Inhaling his cologne of baked apple, musk, and man, I pictured my father giving him a bear hug. I remembered every time Owen had opened a door for me or asked me if something was wrong, sensing my sour mood. I stopped fighting his movements. Stopped trying to slow our momentum. I held my man, followed his lead, and gave myself over to the notion of us.

The disco ball above receded, the people and chatter fell away.

We didn't dance to the music. We *became* the music.

The romantic notes wove through my toes and twisted with my hair. The music strummed under my skin, binding me to him. Owen held me closer than a traditional waltz called for, but I loved how his heart whispered truths against my cheek, the heat of his hand on my back. We spun in circles as the sensual lyrics spoke of falling in love and tripping on your words and being overwhelmed by the woman in your life.

Did that mean Owen was overwhelmed by me? In love with me?

He slowed us down and changed direction, dipping me slightly, just enough for me to glimpse the affection in his warm eyes, then we were gliding again. Rising. Falling. Lights spinning. He turned me into the ballerina of my dreams.

As our confidence grew, he clasped my hand and twirled me in a circle under his arm, once. Twice. My fringe skirt whirled, my belly dipped. My hair was a riot until he caught me against his chest, not skipping a beat as our steps swept us in larger circles.

We were dancing on a cloud.

The song softened, the last chorus drawing us closer. A final dip sent me arching over his arm. A hush fell. My heart soared. He pulled me up slowly, meeting me partway. His lips closed over mine in a sensual rhythm, as spellbinding as our dance. His tongue stroked and swirled, mine following his lead. I never wanted to come up for air.

Someone hollered, "Get a room!"

Applause exploded, the room erupting into cheers as pop tunes returned. The dance floor filled up again, bodies crowding us. I tugged him closer, couldn't let an inch of space between us. "Get me to *your* room."



Our clothes disappeared in a hurry. We didn't make it to his bedroom, barely managed to get up the stairs. He lay sprawled on his hardwood floor, me on top of him. I was dazed, wild with lust, practically clawing at him. I wanted my mouth everywhere at once, a tigress come to claim what was mine.

He pushed up to suck a path down my neck and breast, working my nipple until I panted his name. All that remained was our underwear, the thick line of him rutting against me in the most delicious way.

I needed him inside me. Just plain needed *him*.

Rocking harder, I dug my fingers into his neck. His arms locked around my back as our next kiss turned dirty. Depraved. His teeth nipped my bottom lip in a sharp tug, a sting that had me pulling at his hair while trying to figure out how to get my panties off without letting go.

On a harsh inhale, I pulled back. Our chests heaved, his hungry gaze as savage as mine. There was warmth under the passion, too. A connection I never imagined finding with a man. We stared at each other, breathing hard, letting our eyes say everything we weren't.

*You're mine.*

*I'm yours.*

*Don't you dare hurt me.*

That last sentiment wasn't mine alone. A hint of censure darkened his gaze, a reflection of my own hesitation. It made me fall that much harder. I ran my hand over his brow, down his strong nose, ending on his flush lips. "I'm on the pill."

He stilled. "Are you asking me not to wear a condom?"

Swallowing, I nodded. "Ever since the stuff with my ex, I get tested regularly."

Because I didn't trust men, but I trusted Owen, with my body and my heart, and I wanted him to know it. I'd relived our magical dance the whole ride here, unsure how I'd found myself in a fairy-tale, starring my very own Prince Charming.

He flattened his palm on my chest, over my waltzing heart. “I’m clean, doll. There’s no one else. So tell me you want this. That you want me to thrust my bare cock inside you.”

“God, yes.” A fresh wave of heat seared my thighs.

Grunting, he clutched me to his chest, stood, and walked us to his bedroom, my legs around his waist. I bit his shoulder and nosed his collarbone, even sucked on his chin. He tossed me on the bed, dragged my panties off and shucked his briefs, then he was on his knees, his intense gaze unrelenting as he admired my body while stroking himself.

Using his cock, he pushed my wetness around, teasing me, but he paused. “It’s just us now, Ainsley. You and me.”

My breath caught as I stared at his chiseled jaw and striking cheekbones, infinite passion in his heated gaze. If he were a lying savant who’d cheated on his ex, covering it with the acumen of a thespian, it would devastate me. It wouldn’t leave me with the embittered distrust that still lingered after Brandon’s deception. Owen’s betrayal would breed the kind of hurt that would leave me broken.

But I was whole. And I was his, about to let him sink into me bare.

He pressed his tip into my opening, only an inch. “Okay?”

This. *Yes*. I wanted this. I wanted him and us. “Okay.”

He swiped his thumb over my bottom lip. “Okay.” Then he pushed in. The fullness was instant, all that warm pressure filling my body.

He moaned. “God, you feel good.”

“More.”

“More,” he agreed.

We moved like we’d danced—me following his thrusts, meeting him in time. Rising. Falling. My heart spinning. It wasn’t enough. He was so hard, each deep plunge stoking my desire. *More. More. More.* His skin was on fire, the solid expanse burning up. The weight of him was enough to make

me lose my mind, and the edges of my pleasure took shape. My life took shape, around this man.

I grabbed his ass, arching as my vision went fuzzy, all my limbs hot and tingly. Tingles that sparked. “I’m there.”

His mouth fell on mine. He kissed me harder, fucked me wilder, lifting my knee to force himself deeper. “I want to hear you come. Over and over. All night.”

“If that’s a dare”—I cried out as he tilted his hips, *wow*—“I’ll take it.”

His next move hit me just right, a spot of pleasure that nearly split me apart. “God, *yes*. Right there.” My orgasm splintered through me, a burst of brightness behind my eyes, staggering fullness in my heart.

His release wasn’t far behind, his last thrusts rough and sharp. His body shuddered as his heat rushed into me, and I held him closer, tighter. His voice was haggard as he whispered, “Never letting you go.”

Sounded like a plan to me.

Eventually, he lifted onto his knees and pulled out of me. We both watched the slow drag of his exit. Still turned on, I grabbed his length, so flush and slick. “I want you to come on me.”

His eyes hit their full one-hundred-percent rawness. “You’re going to kill me.”

“It would be a glorious death.”

“That it would.” His words were pure lust as I stroked him. I reveled in how he softened slightly then began moving with my hand, thickening, hardening.

A marathon ensued. He stayed on top, using short strokes to drive me wild, slamming flush when my nails bit into his neck. Over and over. The same rhythm. We didn’t talk. We watched where we were joined until our eyes locked on a gasp, his pupils blowing wide. Then I fell. Ecstasy gripped me, each contraction clamping on his length, but he didn’t come. He slipped out, and I released a cry.

*More. More. More.*

The need to stay connected shook me, and he was rock hard, nowhere near satiated.

I took charge, riding him—breasts bouncing, back arching—until I fractured again. His shoulder was pink from where I'd bitten him. My peaked nipples shone from his greedy mouth.

*More. More. More.*

He still hadn't come again. Grunting, he flipped us so my ass was in the air, and he plunged back inside me in one punishing stroke.

The force knocked me forward. "Are you going for a world record?"

"Can't get enough." More thrusts. Deeper.

A moan tore from my chest. "God, you're thick."

"You're so damn tight. Perfect."

He used his fingers, sliding them under me, rubbing maddening circles as our skin slapped. It took no time, my other orgasms feeding into this one. My arms quivered, my strangled cries an erotic symphony. He pulsed against my inner walls, a second from playing his own crescendo. Except he didn't.

Grunting, he flipped us again—me on my back, him over me—seating himself to the hilt. I should have been boneless, nothing left after the pleasure he'd wrenched from me, but a feral hunger flashed in his eyes. He was pumping fast, using my body to seek his pleasure. I *wanted* him to use me, to wring his own release from my body, because I was his to use, as he was mine.

I felt him swell, the hot length of him thickening into a steel rod. His strokes grew more frenzied. Sweat glinted on his brow. Then he pulled out. One hand branding my hip, he stroked himself with the other, coming on my belly and breasts and chest, long spurts that had him shaking.

His features sharpened, a primal growl rumbling from his throat as he touched my stomach, dragged his fingers through his release. “So hot.”

More like scorching.

Enraptured, I joined him, reveling in the odd sensation of his warm seed drying on my skin. I couldn’t look away from his markings on me. “Watching you like that was unreal.” His cock still jutted proudly, a job well done. “You better put that thing away. I’m tapped out. There’s nothing left.”

He grabbed his boxers and cleaned me up best he could. “Let’s shower.”

After a much needed soak, we flopped back onto his bed. The sheets were a mess, both of us naked and spread-eagled on our backs. Owen’s solid muscle was spent and sprawled beside me. My body felt heavy, all the best places tender. “If we keep this up, I’ll never have to visit the gym again.”

“Challenge accepted.” He lifted my hand to his lips and dropped a sweet kiss on my knuckles. “Best sex of my life.”

My ego took a bow. “I mean, the sex was okay and everything, not my *worst*, but that dance was amazing.”

He read my sarcasm plain as day, exhaustion coloring his laugh. “I know learning my divorce details was hard. I wanted to do something special for you—hoped to show you what you mean to me.”

I loved how his lazy voice lilted into his often-hidden twang. “It was perfect.”

Releasing a contented sigh, I lolled my head from side to side. My sights landed on the jar of glass on his night table. I hadn’t outright asked about it since that first time. It seemed personal to him, something he didn’t often discuss, but I wanted to know Owen. “Are the glass shards from where you grew up?”

The room was dark save for a glow from a corner lamp. A light *scritch* of leaves tapped against his bedroom window. He followed my gaze and reached for the container, bringing it to rest on his chest while tucking me into his side. “Yeah. The

hippie commune. I collected them from a beach we visited, and then from others later.”

He picked up a blue piece and turned it in his hand, then dropped it with a *plunk* back inside. More words followed, his quiet memories filling the room. He told me about the last day he'd seen his mother, and the riddle she'd spoken. Musings about feeling untethered in her world. How he'd scoured the beach for glass afterward, had collected it for the next few years, spending hours on sandy stretches, picking through twigs and rocks and garbage. He even shared how he'd bawled his eyes out to his grandmother, mountains of hate and hurt left in his mother's wake.

Gone was the intense desire from our evening, the air swelling with the wayward world of a lost twelve-year-old boy.

But he was older now, a strong man who'd been abandoned by the one person who should have loved him unconditionally. Somehow, he turned that tragedy around and became sweet and loyal and loving, but my heart squeezed for what he'd endured.

I took a piece of glass, letting the smooth edges bite into my thumb. “Why'd you keep it?”

Easing the glass from my hand, he moved the jar and shifted me on my back. He leaned on his forearm over me. Using the shard, he traced a line from my belly to my breastbone, painted invisible strokes along my lips and nose and brow.

He finished by placing it over my thrumming heart. “I kept them because I believed I'd find someone who had a piece of glass that would fit with mine. That I'd meet a woman who made me feel whole and loved and wanted. Probably some weird Oedipus complex I'd rather not interpret, but that's why I never tossed it.” His voice roughened, scratched up with his history and the baring of his soul. “The second I saw your eyes, Ainsley, they reminded me of the glass. I get lost looking at you sometimes.”

My throat burned, and I bit my lip. “What I feel for you scares me to death.”

“Baby, I know. I’m nervous, too. But this is right. We’re right.”

Instead of agreeing or confessing the extent of my emotion, I said the next best thing. “Is it okay if I sleep over?”

Closing his eyes, he exhaled a long breath. “It would save me from cutting your spark plugs and tying you to the bed.” His tone was light, but he swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple traveling the length of his strong neck.

Since we’d started dating, every time I’d leave his place—never sleeping over, never offering him more—his thinly veiled hurt had cut me to my core. But staying meant trusting, as did sleeping with him without a condom. I was in this relationship mind, body, and soul, whether I was ready or not. “If you *do* mess with my car, I might have to miss work tomorrow. Spend all day in bed. And this piece”—I lifted the glass from my chest and set in on the bedside table—“is mine.”

He placed the full jar next to my blue shard. “You can have it all. And this was my plan, you know. To woo you with the dance so you’d stay over.”

Time for an admission of my own. “I packed a bag earlier. Before dinner at my folks. Before the dance.”

“Yeah?”

“Mmmhmm.”

His gentle smile said he approved. “I still plan to punish you for ambushing me with your father *and* your friends.”

“Do your worst.”

His worst turned out to be kissing me slow and deep until I nudged him off. “I need to grab said bag and brush my teeth. I don’t want to have bad morning breath. I might not get invited back.”

I went to move, but he placed a hand on my arm. The humor drained from his eyes, and the lull that followed sent

my pulse racing. “I e-mailed Tessa today.”

*There goes my afterglow.* God, I hated her name. Hated her vile accusations and the hold she still had on Owen. “About the divorce?”

He nodded. “I spoke with a friend from D.C. and sorted through some stuff. I think if I own part of what went down between us I can get the papers signed. She’s coming here next week. No lawyers. Just us, to talk. I wanted you to know.”

Acid burned through my gut. His honesty this time meant the world, but I didn’t trust a woman hell bent on destroying a man, no matter their history. Even if the text I’d gotten had come from Caroline, Tessa’s vindictiveness had been behind it. I also couldn’t imagine why she thought Owen had cheated on her, had no idea what level of crazy she subscribed to.

Unless she wasn’t crazy. Unless my instincts with Owen were as faulty as they’d been with Brandon.

Head spinning, I said, “Thank you,” putting as much sincerity into the sentiment as possible.

Frazzled, I borrowed a T-shirt, grabbed my bag from my car, and escaped to the bathroom. *Not* cool. So not cool to be having a meltdown after the night we’d shared, but meltdowning I was. All the baggage I thought I’d released roared back, and I gripped the sink. Facing the reality of Tessa and her slander fed my insecurity, rational or not, but I wouldn’t fuel it further. Not this time. I wouldn’t let it ruin this beautiful thing Owen and I had. He also knew his ex. He had a plan.

As did I. I was one step away from becoming my best self and firing my sleazy clients. Facilitating their affairs had to stop, and losing my focus to insecurity could derail my efforts.

Soon I’d be starting a personal shopping business by women, about women, for women, turning the table on my unpleasant job. I’d target those recently divorced, wanting to reinvent themselves in the face of their losses.

What better way to do that than with my pals Dolce and Gabbana?

With Dad landing his job, I had a window of opportunity. He could still get injured, or the factory could fold or cut jobs, so I couldn't sap my savings completely. But I had a shot.

Owen had even donned the hat of my financial (and sex) advisor recently. We'd sat down for a professional meeting, outlining how much money I'd need for a start-up business and ways to access my target market. I would decrease my volunteer shifts to one or two a month, use all spare minutes to build a website. It was the perfect distraction for my persisting paranoia.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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Nine-letter word for the deterioration of metal through oxidization.

*Or when your ex-wife's drama further infects your life.*

### C O R R O S I O N

OWEN

I hated being late. I found it rude and wasteful and generally made a point of watching the clock. But mornings the past couple weeks had been too sweet.

I'd slept at Ainsley's a bunch of nights, and she'd crashed at mine the rest. Each morning I'd tell myself to get up and get dressed, but she'd move in her sleep, snuggling up closer, and I couldn't let her go. I'd stroke her hair instead, tracing the smooth slope of her shoulder, mapping the three freckles set in a line. She'd shift and stretch. My touches would get more demanding until we were rocking together in an endless erotic dance.

Me and my girl.

My remaining time had been spent in my garage, building my inventory for Ellen's new shop. Volunteering had been put on hold, all my energy focused on producing the best work I could. Now I was late.

Not that it mattered when meeting Tessa. Her form of punctual was to arrive at meetings fifteen minutes past schedule. She claimed it set people off kilter, gave her an advantage.

Always a strategy with her.

This afternoon she was sitting in the coffee shop window, waiting on me. She'd traded her usual gray shark-suit for a red sweater and pearls. Her blunt blond hair and bangs framed her contemplative face as she sipped her coffee—likely the strongest they had, no cream or sugar.

It was odd, catching her in a candid moment. I could almost picture us eight years ago, a couple of kids who thought we knew what it would take to build a marriage. So naïve. So much lost time. I assessed how I felt, watching her. My anger bubbled below the surface, always there. Disappointment rang true, too, as did sadness. A heavy weariness that we'd wound up here.

Dragging a hand through my hair, I pushed through the doors and approached her table. "Tessa."

She pressed her hand to her throat. "Owen, you surprised me."

I shrugged off my jacket, rolled up my long sleeves, and settled onto the wooden chair opposite her. An espresso machine *shushed* and *whirred* as the line shuffled forward—business types on their handhelds, oblivious to the world. Tessa nudged a cup toward me. "Still take yours with milk and one sugar?"

I nodded. "Thanks."

Her tight smile showed signs of discomfort. I couldn't remember the last time we'd sat like this, no raised voices. No lawyers trying to keep the peace. Her attention drifted to my forearm. "Did you get in a fight with a grizzly?"

I glanced at the scratches and huffed out a laugh. "More like a fight with a rough wood plank."

"Does that mean you're pursuing your woodworking?"

“Trying to.” Except I had no idea how much more money I’d spend on our divorce.

Gritting my teeth, I bit the words off before they could escape. I focused on my coffee, the warmth of it in my hand. I remembered the warmth of Ainsley in my arms this morning. I couldn’t lose my cool today. There was too much at stake. I also couldn’t do this small talk as though the woman before me wasn’t trying to ruin my life.

I rested my weight on the small round table. “The reason I wanted to talk was I never said I was sorry.”

Hope, similar to her expression the last day I’d barged into her office, colored her cheeks. “I’m listening.”

It should be easy, to lay it out there, explain my struggles all those years ago, but I was suddenly burning up, the low hanging ceiling lamps casting too much heat. I tugged at my crewneck. “I wasn’t happy in D.C. Never liked it. I moved there for you and thought I could make it work, but I felt like a fish out of water.” The memories spilled over, all the frustrations from back then welling up. “My job wore on me. I missed Nana and Emmett. Most of my friends were friends of convenience—or they were yours. I think I shut down on you, and that’s maybe why you started working so much. I’m sure there’s more I did to piss you off, reasons for our slow decline, but I’m realizing now I hold some of the blame. So…”

I buried the fact that she’d turned Caroline against me. I put her recent game—firing her lawyer to toy with me—out of my head. I focused on what we once had, on the hurt I might have caused, and I said a genuine, “I’m sorry.”

She shook her head, a small sad movement. “I knew you weren’t happy. Not like we were in college. I got caught up in the politics at work, and you’d pulled away. I didn’t know how to talk to you. Then you spent all your time on that Habitat project. And I…” Her lips flattened as she trailed off. Hurt sunk into her glossed eyes. “I didn’t know what to do.”

“We got married young, Tess. We were kids.”

“But I was too driven. I worked hard because coming home to you was depressing at times, but it was also an excuse. I’ve been so determined to make partner. I couldn’t see much past that goal.”

“You’re also good at what you do.” Ruthless. The best of the best.

She studied her red nails. “I am.”

Acoustic tunes floated on the coffee-scented air. We sipped our drinks, the tension between us less acute. “It’s been a rough year.”

Her voice grew quiet. “I don’t think you know how hard.”

I couldn’t tell if that was a dig at my supposed cheating or our never-ending divorce. Either way, I didn’t like being partly responsible for a woman’s sadness. I never wanted us to end up like this. “I’m sorry, Tess. Sorry I couldn’t make it work. Sorry I hurt you. Sorry for all the things that brought us here.”

“I’m sorry, too. I’ve made it all harder. It’s the fighter in me.”

I wouldn’t bet against her in a ring. “They don’t call you the Sleeper for nothing.”

She grinned at that. “I do kind of love that nickname.” She lay her hand on the table, palm up. If I wasn’t mistaken, her fingers trembled slightly. “What do you say we start over? Find our feet and try to move forward.”

God, I liked the sound of that. Waving our white flags and surrendering our animosity.

I accepted her offering, placing my hand on hers and giving it a squeeze. What I didn’t expect was for her to place her other hand on top of mine, too. For her to slide her fingers over my knuckles and trace the scratches on my forearm. “I’ve missed you so much.” Her whispered confession held such longing. The type of angst spoken by a lover. “So much.”

I froze. The hairs on the back of my neck stirred. I stared at her roving hand unsure where our wires had gotten crossed. Wires that needed untangling. I gave her another friendly

squeeze, then twisted my arm and pulled my hand away. “We’re talking about the divorce, right? Signing the papers and moving forward with our lives.”

She winced as if I’d slapped her. “What did you say?”

“The divorce, Tessa. Selling our house and ending this standoff.”

Her neck went blotchy as she scanned the mahogany walls as though she’d forgotten where she was. “Is that what this was all about? You offering fake apologies to end us?”

Just when I thought we were getting somewhere. “What else could this be?”

“I swear to God, I’ve never been this oblivious in a courtroom. But you”—her jaw flexed—“you affect me, Owen. Always have. You lured me here with false promises, all for what? To get hitched to your latest whore?”

Anger blasted through me, and I nearly tossed our flimsy table across the room. “Don’t you *dare* talk about my girlfriend like you know her. And this wasn’t a ruse. I *am* sorry. I fucked up. We both fucked up. This was me trying to admit my failure.”

“To finalize our divorce.”

“*Jesus*. Yes. To finalize our divorce.” Patrons glanced our way, and I lowered my voice to an angry hiss. “Did you really think we could fall back in love after everything that’s happened? The lies you’ve spread?”

Her brown eyes narrowed. “I was ready to forgive you *your* indiscretion, but I see clearly now. I won’t make that mistake again, and you’re right. It’s time we both move on with our lives. We’ll sell the house. I’ll sign the papers. You’ll never have to see me again.”

Relief should have bowled me over, but venom bled through her tone. Vindictiveness. I offered a curt nod. “It’s the best for both of us.”

She scraped her chair back, plucked her purse from the window ledge, and smoothed her hands down her jeans. “It’s

the best for *you*, Owen. Everything is always about what's best for you. I wonder if your girlfriend knows what she's in for, how selfish you are."

Steel glinted in her pointed stare, then she strutted out the door, taking the oxygen in the room with her. I sat, cemented in place.

She'd agreed to the divorce, said she'd sign the papers. She could go back on her word, but that wasn't Tessa's style, and she'd never, not once, promised to come to an agreement. Still, worry pooled in my gut. Turning her down just now had hurt her. Her embarrassment had been palpable, and when Tessa felt wronged, Tessa lashed out. But she'd already done her worst. Caroline's text couldn't even ruin what Ainsley and I had.

Riled up and agitated, I headed home and sanded the coffee table I'd been working on within an inch of its life. I measured pieces for the black walnut stools I'd be building. Normally the steady labor cleared my mind. Today was a lost cause.

Ainsley's cute texting didn't even help. When I messaged her that Tessa had agreed to the divorce, she filled my phone with an alphabet of emojis, each more ridiculous than the last. Her silly humor didn't make a dent in my dark mood. I begged out of our usual evening plans, explaining the whole thing had left me drained.

I drove to Emmett's instead, soccer bag in my truck, hoping a hard run on the field would do me good. I'd ignored my brother the past couple weeks, or maybe he'd been ignoring me, but there was no answer.

I stood at his door, mulling over my options. I could go for a run on my own, but I'd end up chasing the uncomfortable dread I couldn't shake. Calling Ainsley and seeking her company would be the best kind of distraction, but she'd want to talk about my meeting. I needed to settle my mind before filling her in. My worry would only stress her out, when I was likely brooding for nothing. Instead I dragged my sorry ass to The Blue Door, hoping Cameron was tending bar.

My favorite thing about the dimly lit wine bar was its come-as-you-are vibe. I'd been here in dress clothes and in my shabby jeans from the Habitat build. Tonight I wore running sweats and a thermal long-sleeve, and I didn't give a damn.

I exhaled at the sight of Cameron's inked arms and slick pompadour. "Double Scotch on the rocks."

"This becoming your new drink?"

"It's been a wild couple months." I slid onto a barstool. The place was quiet, a handful of tables full, typical for a Thursday. A cool blast of air shot through the entrance as a few men hurried in. Cameron dropped my drink in front of me, and I knocked back a healthy swallow.

"That rough?" he asked.

"Not sure if today was good or bad, just glad it's over."

"Sounds intriguing."

I shrugged, effectively ending the conversation. There wasn't much for me to process besides needing to unwind. I was getting my divorce. Tessa misguidedly hoped there was a chance we could mend our fences and try again. It would never happen. Even if I weren't in love with Ainsley, there was no spark of affection I could fan for my ex.

Cameron filled a few orders while I nursed my drink. The heat of it burned my throat and chest, incinerating thoughts of Tessa and her diabolical games as it slid down. My muscles loosened. My mind uncoiled. It really had been a rough year. Or the best if I counted the Habitat build and meeting Ainsley, the girl with the beach-glass eyes and wicked sense of humor who turned my world right-side up.

I couldn't count how many times I'd wanted to pull her close and whisper *I love you*. I'd watched her face for signs she felt the same, but Ainsley was still coming around to the notion of us spending all our nights and mornings together, to her vegan food next to my "gross" deli meat in my fridge. At times she'd worry her lip when lost in thought, a sign I'd taken to mean:

*What if this backfires in my face?*

Cameron wiped a spot on the bar, then replenished a bowl of pretzels, sneaking glances my way. I readied myself for prying questions, but he said, “You heard from Emmett recently?”

Maybe I wasn’t the one who needed to talk. “Barely. When I text him, I get a curt reply. Went by tonight but no one answered.”

“So it’s not just me...” He spoke softly, as though to himself.

It activated my Brother the Manwhore Radar. “You ignored my advice, didn’t you?”

He kept rubbing the same spot. “It had been a while since I’d dated. I thought having some fun would do me good.”

“But you got in too deep?”

He scoped the bar, letting his gaze drag over the half-full tables. “Guilty.”

One word filled with regret.

I hated my brother sometimes. “Don’t take it personally. Emmett’s only interested in casual.”

Cameron gripped his cloth, his confusion and hurt plain as day. “That’s just it—it wasn’t casual. It was only, like, six weeks, and yeah, it was fun at first, but things got intense fast. The way I felt about...*feel* about him—I’ve never had that before. And he was right there with me. I’m sure of it. Then he disappeared. Slipped out of bed one night while I was sleeping. No goodbye. No note. He won’t return any texts or calls.” He rolled out his shoulders. “Is that normal for him? When you warned me not to date him, is that what you meant?”

Definitely *not* normal. “Emmett’s flings usually last a month or so, but he’s always made sure his partners are on the same page, and he’s clear about where they stand when things end.” Slipping out in the middle of the night was definitely not his MO. It meant something was up, and my frustration with him morphed into worry.

“That’s what I thought.” Cameron’s forehead compressed, deep furrows framing his pained eyes. “I think he’s freaking out. Just not sure how to help him.”

If the tortured look on Cameron’s face was any indication, my brother may be falling in love. It also meant Emmett was probably spiraling, unsure how to deal with that kind of emotion. “I’ll talk with him. See what I can find out.”

“Thanks, man.” He nodded a bunch. “Thanks a lot.”

He retreated to work the bar, and I focused on my drink, on Emmett and me and all we’d endured. Our mother’s abandonment had left its mark on us, all right. He was terrified of gaining affection, only to risk losing it. My damaged pendulum swung the other way. I craved permanence. I let my marriage linger years too long, afraid to be afloat. Now I had Ainsley. I was sure she was different. *We* were different. But if things changed, if she didn’t want kids or we fell apart the way couples sometimes did, unable to find their way back, I wouldn’t let it fester this time. I’d honor myself, not settle.

Emmett needed to learn how to hold onto the special people in his life, a lesson I’d have to drill into him, and I needed to remember how to let go.

If my instincts were right, though, I wouldn’t be letting Ainsley loose anytime soon. Already, I regretted putting her off tonight. I could pull up her name on my phone, type *I love you*, and hit Send. Finally release the words I’d been holding hostage. Drive to her house and growl them as I came all over her creamy skin.

I’d loved marking her with my come. The act had felt intimate, in an odd way. Dirty yet binding. But there was no point texting or showing up at her place tonight. I’d let my day settle. See her tomorrow. And the next day. And the next. Finalize my divorce. Maybe get married again...one day. Relaxing for the first time in hours, I finished my Scotch.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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Thirteen letters for the machine that pumps wastewater from  
beneath the main drain.

*Or* when you're forced to evict your piece-of-shit boyfriend  
from your life.

### SEWAGEJECTOR

AINSLEY

Yawning, I rolled over in bed, blindly reaching beside me, a sleepy smile on my face. My happy haze vanished when I came into contact with empty sheets, not a construction hunk stealing my covers. Pouting, I pulled my pillow over my face.

It was wild how quickly I'd gotten used to our sleepovers and the weight of him against me—an arm tossed over my middle, his calf pinning mine. I'd also missed him terribly last night, drowning my sorrows in Aazam's decadent chocolate bark.

Until I'd gotten Owen's good news: the divorce. *Over*. The papers soon to be signed. It meant he could pursue his woodworking in earnest and eject that bitch from his life, and I could stop worrying about the cheating scandal that never happened.

Pumped to start my day and celebrate with him, I tossed my pillow onto the floor and pushed my tangle of hair from

my face. My sights landed on my piece of blue glass. I'd left it beside my alarm clock so I could see it every day. Sun beamed through my window, a ray hitting the glass just so, turning it from powder blue to turquoise. Like my eyes, Owen had said.

A glow burned inside me as I stared at it, all our lunch dates and kissing and sharing and dancing collecting into a bright spot under my breastbone until the truth of my feelings burned clear. I loved Owen Phillips. I loved him so much it threatened to crack me open from the pure joy of it.

I squealed like I was sixteen and flopped on the bed, grabbing the blue glass and spinning it through my fingers. I should make a necklace out of it, have a jeweler fasten something special. Owen would love it, and I could always have it close, just like him. Maybe take a few more shards, add some detail.

Practically floating, I rolled over and grabbed my phone to text him.

Me: I forgot my favorite mascara at your place.  
Can I come by to steal it?

Owen: Only if I get to see you tonight.

Me: You drive a hard bargain. I'll pencil you in.

Owen: I'm around until noon but need to hit the hardware store, then I have a meeting at Ellen's barn.

Me: I'll try to swing by before you leave.

My fingers hovered over my screen, itching to hit the I and L and O and V and E. My belly felt bubbly, effervescence rising until I giggled. God, I was pathetically in love, but I wouldn't waste the opportunity for us to have ridiculous I-said-my-first-I-love-you sex by typing it on a phone.

I also had no intention of showing up while he was home. This was a stealth operation: Mission Mad Love. Show him what he meant to me by turning his most prized possession into a pendant I'd wear over my heart.

I texted Rachel instead, who texted Jimmy, who gave me Emmett's number, who then agreed to lend me his key. Next I called Volikov's and made an afternoon appointment. The jeweler was a gem virtuoso. He also owed me a favour. (Acquiring him Versace Medusa-strap sneakers at half price had been a miracle.) I could wait to steal some of Owen's glass tonight, but I was too pumped to get rolling. Plus, working on it might help balance the horrible-awful confrontation I'd planned for the morning.

My mood dipped. But if I truly wanted to fulfill my resolution and be a better person, there was no avoiding my fate.

A fate which began by writing e-mails to each douchebag client and firing their cheating asses. My website was almost finished, my calendar clearer to focus more attention on this new venture. I still had Felipe and a few upstanding clients. The rest could kiss my Miu Miu-clad behind. I sent the electronic pink slips, elation tickling my fingers. Next came the hard part.



I parked in front of Sloane's home, my hands gripping my steering wheel like it was the last Prada purse on a sale shelf. Thomas Arlington the *third's* car wasn't there, but I'd pathetically hoped to find it. If he were home, I wouldn't be able to knock on the front door and tell a lovely woman, who had bought me ballet tickets, that her husband was scum.

I'd rather be locked in an elevator than face Sloane, or stuck on one of those reality shows where I'd have to eat bugs or bats or sheep intestines.

I hadn't developed as close relationships with the other duped wives, wasn't comfortable e-mailing them about their husbands' indiscretions. But Sloane was a friend. Breaking Thomas's confidentiality could damage my reputation, but she deserved to hear the truth from me, in person.

I wiped my damp palms down the front of my gingham wrap dress, the same one I'd worn the first day I'd met Owen in all his manly glory. I considered it my lucky dress. I hoped it would give me strength to face my fears. *Here goes nothing.*

Attempting not to hyperventilate, I rang Sloane's doorbell. The kind woman answered and smiled, clueless that I was about to dismantle her life. I may have been in my lucky dress, stilettos, makeup and hair primped, but I was pretty sure I looked like a hideous troll.

"Ainsley, what a nice surprise."

She opened the door wider, but I couldn't step inside. The news I brought didn't deserve a warm invitation. "I need to tell you something. I should have told you ages ago, but...well, I won't make excuses, because there aren't any, and you deserve to know. It's just tough to say, and I've been a coward."

Already tall, her posture straightened farther, one hand on the door. "You're not making sense."

Because I was a babbling idiot, and there was no sugar-coating this atomic bomb. "Thomas is cheating on you."

Sloane's chin didn't tremble. She didn't choke on a sob. Her eyes darkened. "What are you talking about?"

Bile burning my throat, I confessed it all. How I'd met three women during my time with Thomas. That I was often asked to buy them gifts and clothes. That he was currently involved with someone and had spun a web of lies. "It's not your fault—I want you to know that. I worked for a number of men like him, and they thought they were beyond reproach or something, that their actions didn't—"

"Go." She spat the word, her stare hardening. "I don't know what your angle is, but I won't stand here and listen to such filth."

She moved to close the door, but I put my trembling palm on the wood. "I know it's hard to hear. I was in your position once, duped by a man. But I'm not lying. I have *met* these women. I have been in their homes. I have listened to your

husband tell them he's getting a divorce. This isn't second-hand information."

She cocked her head, her disgusted gaze raking me from my honey highlights to my stilettos. "You've fallen in love with him, haven't you? Is this your way of getting me out of the picture? Forcing us apart? Well, it won't work. I love Thomas and he loves me, and you and your lies can go to hell."

She slammed the door in my face, the force of it blowing back my hair.

I winced. My knees weakened as I hurried to my car. I'd expected to face devastation—tears and anguish as the news I'd brought sunk in. Never had I considered she wouldn't believe me. The blind devotion was even worse. She either wasn't willing to risk a lifestyle change, or she loved him so much she couldn't face the truth. Such misguided loyalty, but it was her choice to make. Her life. I'd done what I could.

Frazzled, I picked up Owen's key from Emmett's mailbox. I drove home to spend a couple hours on my website, distracted the whole while. Making this gift for Owen was a smart move. I could focus on real love. Remind myself some men were devoted and true. When the clock read 1:00 p.m., I got ready.

He would be gone by now, and I could sneak in. Surprise him with the necklace in a month or so. Maybe I'd have them make him cufflinks, too. Something he could wear to think of me.

Buoyed at the prospect, I opened my door, but frowned. A manila envelope sat on the floor. Peeking my head into the hallway, I scanned left and right, but couldn't see a soul. Curious, I dropped my purse, scooped up the package, and turned it over. No address. Nothing written. I wasn't a prime target for terrorists, but I sniffed the edges. Did anthrax have an aroma?

Or Sloane could have sent a bomb to my home, but nothing protruded at sharp angles. I flipped open the flap to find photographs. Maybe Owen had thought of his own gift,

dirty photos sent as a tease for tonight. I bit my lip as I pulled them out...

And nearly fainted.

My hands shook. My breath clawed at my chest. Lowering to my knees, I dropped the photos and pushed them around, sure my mind was playing tricks on me.

But no. No, no, no. The images were crystal clear:

Owen with his hands on a woman's face.

Owen leaning down, his back to the camera, but unquestionably *kissing* the woman.

The couple hugging.

The couple holding hands.

My head spun, pressure building at the base of my skull. A drop fell on the top image, my tear hitting the man I love on his chest. What were these? How? When?

A time stamp on the bottom sent relief crashing through me. These weren't recent. These were old, but Owen had left Tessa in March of last year, almost a year ago. These photos were dated February, while he was still married and living with his wife. Like Caroline's text had claimed.

My attention shot to my still-open door. Was *she* here? Caroline? Or Tessa? Had one of them followed me home and left these?

The violation of it slicked my palms, as did the reality of this evidence. Owen had promised he'd never cheated. I'd asked him point-blank, and he'd sworn the accusations were lies.

There had to be some mistake. A man who looked like Owen maybe. The images doctored so his ex could destroy him and what we had. Or maybe he'd played loose with the definition of cheating when we'd talked about his marriage. Cheating means different things to people, and he'd lied by omission before, hiding behind words.

Were these more secrets? His deceits come to life?

I wanted to dump the photos in the sink with a vat of acid and pretend this nightmare wasn't happening, like Sloane had closed her ears to the truth. Choosing ignorance over fact.

More tears pooled, but I blinked them away before they spilled over this damning evidence. I would not full-on ugly cry. Not over a man. Not again. Full of trepidation, I picked up the envelope. Two photos were still tucked inside. I didn't want to look. I wanted to close my eyes and rewind time, but I was drawn to this car wreck, lured by the gory details.

Gut twisting, I pulled the last images out. Owen again, but with another woman, and they were dancing. He was holding her close, his face dreamy, like he was exactly where he wanted to be. In the next, he was dipping her like he'd dipped me in the club, bathing her in one of his glorious smiles. Those were my smiles. They were meant for me, and that was my dance. The time stamp on the bottom was the final blow. It wrenched a sob from deep in my bones.

Three weeks ago. While he'd told me secrets and promised me love and affection, while we'd had sex *without a condom*, he'd been with another woman.

My anguish hardened into a ball of fury.

He'd lied to me. Had used me. For what? It didn't make sense, but I'd seen men do this and much worse, always thinking with their dicks. I loved Owen, deeply, *painfully*. I couldn't hide from that sad truth. But I wouldn't be like Sloane, blind to reality. Believing my man's lies. I would surgically remove Owen from my life and never again trust a man.

The drive to his house was a blur of vengeance. I was Poison Ivy. I was Cersei Lannister. I was Maleficent and every raging villainess ready to set fire to the world. I would be nobody's fool. Except Owen's truck was in his driveway.

I slammed my foot on the brake, almost giving myself whiplash. *Oh God*. He'd said he'd be out. He'd asked me not to come by in the afternoon.

More lies. More deception.

This was Brandon all over again, forcing me to see my lover in the throes of his affair. I should leave. I should hit the gas and drive, drive, drive. But I was stuck.

It was perverse, this need of mine to pull my car up next to his. To grab the envelope of treachery, put one foot in front of the other and walk through his door and up his stairs. But I couldn't stop my legs from moving or my heart from screaming or my throat from constricting.

It wasn't my intention to confront him. So raw and wounded, I'd never have dared face him yet. The plan was to leave the evidence on his counter, then drive to Napa Valley. Get away from this town and these lies. This devastating agony. Cry to Rachel until I was dehydrated, then find a way to reclaim my armor and resume my life.

Now that I was here, I couldn't turn away.

Nausea churned my stomach. I had to pause, hand on the stairwell wall until it passed. It took several deep breaths to find my resolve. Footsteps thudded above me, moving in one direction, then another, a low baritone following, as though Owen were talking to someone, but I couldn't make out the words. When I entered his place, he was leaving his room, head down, fully dressed. A small mercy. At least I wouldn't have to see his naked body loving on someone else.

I tried to look past him, into his room, but the door was nearly shut. He glanced up and jumped at the sight of me. *Surprise, asshole.*

He grinned, the brightness of his smile shattering what was left of my heart. His full wattage was aimed at me like we were the last beings on this planet, no mistress in his life. No betrayal about to rip us to shreds. It was also the same smile he'd lavished on the *other* woman he'd been dancing with.

His eyes roved over my face, his grin slipping into a frown.

I couldn't imagine how I looked. Rabid? Furious? Destroyed? He tried to close the gap between us with long

strides, but the second he was close enough, I shoved him back. “Don’t.”

He flinched. “Ainsley, baby, what’s wrong?”

He reached for me, but I batted away his arms. “I thought you were supposed to be out.”

“I was...but I got caught up on staining a table and figured I’d hit the hardware store after meeting Ellen.”

Lies. Nothing but lies. “Is she in here? In your room?”

Furrow sinking deeper in his brow, he glanced at his bedroom door, then back at me. “Who? What’s going on?”

“Your girlfriend, that’s who. Is she in there? Hiding in your goddamn sheets?” I shoved past him and smacked the door so hard it cracked against the wall. Empty.

Owen pleaded with me to talk, explain. I ignored the traitor. I tore through his closet, even though it was clear no one was inside. I made for the bathroom next. I checked behind his kitchen counter. The tears I’d struggled to keep at bay came hard and fast. The Ugly Cry in all its horrible glory. But there was no one here. No one but us and the envelope clutched in my hand.

With my back against his living room wall, I slid down. My butt hit the hard floor. I sobbed. I tugged at my dress, fighting to cover my knees. I felt so *naked*.

He crouched in front of me, his face twisted in distress. Like he cared. Like *my* tears were gutting *him*. “Ainsley, I need you to tell me what’s happened.” He reached for me, but drew his arm back when I glared. “Talk to me. I can’t help unless I know what’s wrong.”

Unable to form the vial words on my tongue, I tossed the envelope at him.

He seized it, fumbling to get the photographs out. His eyes widened instantly, his broad chest rising and falling as fast as mine. He mouthed *what the fuck* as he dropped them on the floor and shifted them around, as though sorting through

puzzle pieces. They were, in a sense. Each represented a jagged piece of my soul.

“Where did you get these?”

The bite in his tone had me shrinking. What right did he have to be mad? “They were left at my front door. Do you know these women?”

“*Fucking Tessa.*” Ignoring my question, he smacked the hardwood with the heel of his palm. “*Fuck!*” I jolted, horrified as he jammed his hand into the wood repeatedly. He crushed a couple photos in his fist, nostrils flaring as his tantrum ebbed.

“Do you know these women?” An odd calm claimed me as I repeated my question. My voice was even. The tears had ceased.

Sinking to his knees, he sighed. “Yes, I know them, but I can explain.”

Like he’d *explained* about Caroline’s text. “I have photographic evidence.”

The anguish in his pleading eyes was almost believable. “This”—he picked up the one from last year with his hands on the brunette’s face—“is Summer. We met on the D.C. Habitat build. This was the day she found out her husband was cheating on her. We were friends. Nothing more. Tessa had a private eye trailing me at one point, but I thought it was later.”

He touched the image of his back facing the camera. The one with his large body leaning over Summer as if in a kiss. “I guess this is why she thinks I cheated,” he murmured, slumping lower. Then his vehemence returned. “I kissed Summer’s cheek, I think, trying to comfort her. But it was never more. Never. You can call her, ask her. I swear to God, Ainsley—I *never* lied to you.”

I sat, numb, unable to reply or cry or yell.

Frantic now, he pointed at the shot of him dancing with the thin blond. A beauty with large eyes. “I took dance lessons. To prepare for the waltz. This is Irina. She turned her den into a small studio and does private lessons. I’ll give you her number, too. Call *them*. Ask *them*.”

His dark eyes were feral, desperate, and I nearly said, *okay, yes, I believe you*. I wanted to trust him so badly. The same way Sloane wanted to assume Thomas was true. Like I'd believed every work meeting Brandon had ever invented. These women could easily corroborate a lie. Talking to them would mean nothing.

I couldn't see past the pain. Or answer him.

"*Christ.*" He shot to his feet, pacing like a caged beast. "This is just Tessa playing her evil games. Don't let her ruin us. Don't let her destroy what we have."

"It's too much. The text. This..." I pressed my hand to my chest, willing the sharp pain to subside.

Owen speared his fingers through his hair, the tendons in his neck taut. "I didn't cheat on Tessa. I didn't cheat on you. I've never betrayed a woman in my life. It must have been horrible seeing those photos. I get it. But after all we've shared, what I thought we had"—he faced me and deflated—"how could you doubt me?"

I wrapped my arms around my middle, drowning in despair. His anguish felt thick enough to taste, so unbelievably real, and my anger morphed into confusion. If he was telling the truth, and I'd assumed the worst in him—my baggage messing with my head—then maybe I wasn't ready for a relationship. Maybe I never would be.

But the photos were damning, too, neither prospect painting a pretty picture.

Swiping at my tears, I pushed to stand, stumbling as I sought balance. "I don't know what to believe."

"Believe *me*. Believe in us."

"It's so hard."

"Baby, I know it's hard. But this is Tessa trying to split us up same as she turned my friends against me."

I hugged my waist tighter, sure I would crumble. I couldn't answer him or process a word he was saying. The longer I stayed silent, the more shadows drifted across his face. His

cheekbones sharpened. His lips flattened into a grim line. “So this is how it is. My word, my assurance, means nothing.”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled, faint and feeble. I couldn’t form a coherent thought.

He scrubbed a hand down his face, looking as exhausted as I felt. “Thing is, Ainsley, I *do* know. I know exactly how I feel about you. And if you can’t look at me and see past these lies, then maybe...” He trailed off, resignation thinning his voice. “Maybe we aren’t worth fighting for.”

His admission was a fresh blow, lancing the wind from my chest. One second I wanted nothing more than to neuter him like the dog I thought he’d proven himself to be, next the air rushed from my lungs. He was giving up. *He* was leaving *me*.

Is that what I’d wanted? For him to beg my forgiveness? Pledge his first born? Sacrifice himself at my altar? None of which I deserved if he was telling the truth. It was all such a mess. I needed to leave. Get in my car and drive. Stop my head from spinning.

“I have to go,” I mumbled. Once. Twice. The same sentence over and over as I nearly tripped over my feet to reach the stairs. He didn’t stop me or chase me out the door. He barely moved. I fled, and he did nothing.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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Five-letter word for the wetness of concrete.

*Or your sad existence when you lose the love of your life.*

S L U M P

OWEN

I'd been bucked badly from a horse once, slammed onto the ground so hard every bone in my body had vibrated. I was sore for months afterward, each inhale reminding me my ribs had cracked. Now each inhale reminded me my heart had fractured.

It had been five days since Ainsley walked out my door. One hundred and twenty hours of lying awake and cursing Tessa and working endless hours in my shop. Sawing and sanding and staining were supposed to give me peace, calm my frazzled nerves. Nothing worked. Then I'd happened upon Ainsley's tofu lodged behind my orange juice this morning and lost my shit. Doors were slammed. Curses yelled. My bookshelves hit the floor. My exhaustive run that followed subdued my misery, but not the constant ache in my chest.

Each day I tried convincing myself I'd made the right call, that not fighting for Ainsley was the smart move. I couldn't have a repeat of Tessa, I'd remind myself. Wouldn't get stuck in a relationship where I was more invested, more in love,

more present than my partner. If Ainsley had loved me, she wouldn't have walked out the door.

The mental marathons were a losing battle.

Sweat coated my back from my exhaustive run. I stood, hand braced on my fridge as I chugged a Gatorade so fast it dripped down my chin. My phone buzzed from my counter. Wiping my forearm across my mouth, I glanced at the screen. *Jimmy.*

He'd been texting since Friday. First to tell me Ainsley was at his place in Napa, safe and sound, then to keep me updated on how she was doing. I never replied. Not to ask questions or to vent. Not to tell him to quit meddling. I was desperate for news of her, had to make sure she was okay. I almost hopped in my truck a thousand times to drive there and grovel at her feet, but I didn't trust my heart. I didn't trust hers.

That left me in this endless eddy, drowning.

I tapped on Jimmy's message as I always did, pulse spurring for news of my girl—an endearment I couldn't shake. He didn't mention Ainsley, though.

Jimmy: Gwen will be driving down to spend the weekend in Napa with the girls. I've been kicked out. Heading to The Blue Door on Friday. You should come.

No hint as to how Ainsley was doing. Did she wish she'd never met me? Was she cursing my name or hardly giving me a thought?

Earlier this week, Jimmy had said she was upset, struggling. An image that had gutted me. I'd barely slept that night and worked on a new maple table until the sun rose. Not mentioning Ainsley now might mean she was moving on, which was what I'd said we should do. So why did the prospect make me want to punch the fucking wall?

I replied with a noncommittal *Maybe*, unsure I'd be better off in two days. Right now being in public and socializing was up there with watching reality TV. What did give me pause was his mention of The Blue Door. I'd forgotten about my

chat with Cameron, hadn't spared my brother a thought during my seclusion. A fact in need of remedy.

A quick shower later, I tossed on jeans and a sweater and drove to Emmett's earlier than he'd prefer. Of the two of us, I was the morning person growing up, kicking a soccer ball for hours before he'd lumber from his room. Today's seven a.m. intrusion would annoy him, but being stuck in my place alone was unappealing. With my distracted state, I'd wind up cutting off my hand with my jigsaw, or I'd stare at my jar of beach glass again.

Another bleak ritual this week.

It took three pounding sessions on Emmett's door before he yanked it open. Flannel pants hung low on his hips, his tight wife-beater askew. His dark curls were plastered to one side of his face, and his exaggerated yawn forced him to squint. "What the hell, man?"

Without waiting for an answer, he scratched his chest and shuffled into the kitchen. I followed. His office door was open, giving me a glimpse of the posters on his wall—his most successful graphic design campaigns. My lazy brother was talented enough to work freelance, choose his hours, and never have to advertise. His place was nicer than mine, the open kitchen neater than was usual for him. His minimal furniture and coffee table were tidy, too. The way he'd been MIA, I'd expected the place to look like a crash site.

He hunched over his coffee machine while I leaned against his center island. I rubbed the exhaustion from my stinging eyes. "We need to talk."

"Apparently. You look like ass."

I felt like it, too. Assumed I'd look better than my brother, though. My brother, who was whistling as he poured us both steaming cups of coffee. A dash of sugar and milk later, we sat on the stools at his counter, side by side, eyes forward. "You've been hiding out," I said.

We sipped our coffee. The icebox in the freezer churned. "A bit. Had to figure some stuff out."

“And have you?”

A sly grin curved his lips. He didn't reply, but the sound of a flushing toilet came from behind us, and my anger surged. I couldn't keep it contained these days, but he was doing it again—using flings to avoid the one thing that truly mattered: love. It was bullshit, would only hurt him in the long run, when he had a shot at something real.

Lowering my voice, I hissed, “Fucking around isn't the answer. I spoke with Cameron. He's into you, and by the sounds of things, you feel the same. If you do this, start sleeping around again, he won't be there at the end.”

“And what do you know about seeing things through?” he bit back. We faced each other, forearms on the counter, angry glares locked. “Jimmy called me this week, told me about Tessa's stunt and said you've dropped down a wormhole over Ainsley. I thought I'd give you time to wallow, but you look like utter shit.”

“Fuck you.”

“I had plenty last night, thanks.” He winked, and I had half a mind to smack the smirk from his face. He barely paused. “You're as screwed up as me, by the way. Terrified to let people go, then scared to hold onto something real. Tessa is certifiable. I'm pleased as shit she's out of your life, but don't let what happened with her ruin your chance with Ainsley.”

Except it wasn't Tessa who'd ruined us. Not really. Ainsley had let her past influence her present and couldn't trust me. She'd turned on me like Caroline and my other friends. Or did she need me to push harder, convince her I wasn't like her ex? Drill it in that having faith in me wasn't repeating her mistakes. If I'd done that, maybe I'd have found a way to do the same—realize loving her wasn't repeating mine.

I wasn't sure when this intervention had become about me, but I found myself weakening, my hurt and confusion spilling out. “I love her. I've never felt anything this intense before.” The truth had me sinking heavier on my stool. “But how do I know she feels the same? Tessa didn't. I've owned stuff that

went down between us, but she didn't want me in the end, not until she couldn't have me. So how do I know I won't wind up here again, another breakup, more heartache? And Ainsley didn't believe me. I told her the truth, laid it all out for her, and she still couldn't trust me. If we don't have trust, what the hell do we have?"

Before he could answer, footsteps padded toward us. I gritted my teeth, reminding myself to be nice. Telling Emmett's latest fling to take a hike wouldn't help matters.

"You guys look serious."

I startled at the familiar voice and turned to see Cameron in his boxers, inked chest on display. He walked over to my brother, looped his arm around his waist, and kissed the back of his neck. He moved into the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee, smiling as though it were any ordinary Wednesday. "I'll have this in the bedroom. Leave you two to it."

I chuckled to myself as he left, then knocked Emmett's shoulder. "You sly dog. You're actually giving him a chance."

He spun his mug, a blush cresting his cheeks. "Took a while to realize he was worth the risk. And in answer to your question: you and Ainsley have love...and *love*, I've come to realize, is fucking terrifying. It makes trusting harder, because it means the fall if you get hurt could be crushing. It's how I felt when Mom left, and I didn't want to chance experiencing that again. My guess is Ainsley is dealing with similar crap over her ex. So, no—you won't know for sure she feels the same or won't freak out again in the future, like I don't know for sure this thing with Cameron won't backfire. But the idea of losing him was worse."

Yawning, he rubbed his eye. "Look, no matter what else happens, we both have Nana. And"—he lifted the side of his tank top, displaying freshly inked ribs—"we'll always have each other."

"You got a tattoo?"

"It's been an odd month." He dropped the fabric before I could puzzle out the four cursive words. "You don't need to

read it though.”

“Why’s that?”

“You have the same tattoo. Only mine’s in English and not on my ass.”

Motherfucker. “I either stick you in a headlock right now, or you show me your tattoo.”

“But it’s been so fun, you not knowing what it means.”

“Emmett...” My warning tone held no humor.

“Calm your tits.” Instead of grinning his cocky grin, he lowered his voice. “The anniversary of Mom’s epic display of motherhood is coming up, which fed into me pushing Cameron away and getting the ink. But the night of your ass tattoo...what was it? The nine year anniversary of her leaving?”

I huffed out a sad laugh at the passage of time. Nine years back then meant this anniversary would be eighteen.

“We were both sloppy drunk,” he pushed on, “but you were worse. Fucking annihilated. You kept going on about how you’d never leave me. How you’d take care of me and make sure I was happy, as though you could fix what she’d done. Always taking on the role of mother and father.”

“It was my job,” I murmured.

“Self-imposed, maybe. But you admitted something to me that night. You were tanked and talking gibberish, but your eyes cleared at one point. You said something like ‘I’m not good enough. Not for her. Not for some father I never met. Probably not for you.’ It was the first time I saw the weight of what she’d done hit you.”

As kids, it had been on me to make sure Emmett brushed his teeth and went to sleep at a reasonable hour when left afloat in our hippie commune. I’d force him to clean up after dinner, taught him to kick a soccer ball and ride a bike. Always being the parent. I may have cried to Nana after she’d come to claim us, but never in front of Emmett.

I had to be the strong one.

“Back to the ink,” I said, my voice gruff.

He ran his thumb around the rim of his mug. “I don’t remember how we wound up in Frederic’s shop. I think he questioned if you really wanted a tattoo, and you were all over the idea, but didn’t know what to get. You said you wanted something meaningful. Permanent. Always searching for things that stuck. Then out of nowhere, you grabbed my shoulders and told me to choose. You wanted something that represented us.” He shrugged. “So I chose.”

I was black-out wasted that night, but putting blind trust in my idiot brother was pure insanity. “And you chose Japanese words I couldn’t read?”

He snorted. “That part was to screw with you. Couldn’t resist convincing you to get it on your ass, either.”

“Lift your goddamn shirt, Emmett.”

Amusement lit his dark eyes. He teased me by lifting and dropping his shirt’s hem half a dozen times. *Fucker*. When I cuffed the back of his head, the bastard complied. I read the words once, then again, gripping his far shoulder as my throat burned. “This is what mine means? The same thing?”

“Yeah.” His voice was as quiet as mine.

I read them a third time, staring at the bold, clean lines:

*Courage*

*Strength*

*Brothers*

*Forever*

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Messing with you was too much fun.”

I traced the ink, the four simple words that defined us. We were courageous. We were strong. We’d have each other’s backs for the rest of our lives. I pulled him into a crushing hug.

Emmett was dealing with his issues, growing up and risking his heart for the first time. What about me? Was

pushing Ainsley away smart or cowardly? Was assuming she was taking the easy way out—not fighting for me, believing in me, truly loving me—my way of letting my fears run my life? I was scared I’d hold onto something wrong again. Thought I was too messed up to understand the difference, and I’d let the best thing to ever happen to me slip away.

The truth of it was a punch to the gut.

Ainsley needed space to process the lies Tessa had dropped in her lap, like Emmett had needed to find his way in his own time. I should have allowed her that, not given her an ultimatum. I should have fought for the woman I love.

Emmett pounded my back and returned to his coffee. “You okay?”

I exhaled a shaky breath. “No.”

“You miss her?”

“Man, it’s *killing* me.” I rubbed the tender spot on my chest.

“Then stop being an ass and get her back.”

“When did you get so smart?”

He glanced down the hall, to where his boyfriend was holed up. “Met someone who knocked some sense into me.”

“Best if I follow your lead. I’d also like to hang out soon, get to know Cameron better. Maybe at Nana’s next week?”

He smiled into his coffee. “She’s gonna embarrass the piss out of me.”

“Well deserved.”

We talked awhile longer, filling each other in on our lives the past weeks, made plans to play soccer soon. Once in my truck, I debated sending Ainsley a text. It could be too soon. Seeing those photos and reliving her ex’s betrayal wasn’t something that would disappear overnight. But I couldn’t wait.

Me: We need to talk.

I pressed Send and dragged my hand down my face. I'd give her a few days, the weekend with the girls to do their girl thing. Commiserate. Call me every name there was, if that's what it took. Then I'd do what I should have done five days ago: fight for the woman I love.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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Eight letters for the vertical frames alongside window openings.

*Or the hunky guy you're madly in love with.*

K I N G S T U D

AINSLEY

Clothing purchases were much like dating. Some items, once washed and worn, never fit right again. Some acquisitions were trendy, cool finds that became closet favorites until blacklisted to the kill-me-before-I'm-seen-in-public-with-this-again pile. Other purchases would sit folded in a drawer, overlooked time and again, until you tried them on with new jeans or shoes and realized, *wow—I had this gem all along.*

Then there was Owen.

Owen was the staple piece. The timeless classic. He was a steady pair of black pumps, the blazer that never went out of style. The Coach purse every woman coveted.

And I ran away from him.

I hadn't heard from him for the five endless days since I'd left his apartment. I'd replayed our time together ad nauseam. Had reviewed the honest conversations I'd shared with Gay-Not-Gay Owen during our many lunches, along with how our friendship had bled into passion and companionship. Those

moments hadn't been imagined. Neither had the way he'd fit in with my family, or how much we'd laughed, or how intense our time in bed had been. Our dance had been the most romantic gesture this side of *The Notebook*.

But I hadn't given him the one thing he'd needed: my trust.

My phone rang from somewhere near me. I'd avoided it recently and had hijacked Rachel's couch, turning the cushy red sofa into my personal pity-party zone. Kleenex littered the cushions, fashion magazines overtook the floor. I'm pretty sure there was popcorn stuck in my hair. I felt around for my cell, wiggling like a depressed worm, until I found it smooshed between the seat cushions. The name lighting up my screen nearly had me launching it across the room.

*Sloane.*

I could flush the phone down the toilet or change my number, maybe run over it with Rachel's motorcycle. *Or* I could be a grown-up and answer the darn thing. Voting on adult, I hit Talk. My body tensed as I waited for a shrill scream to deafen my eardrum.

"Ainsley?" Sloane's quiet voice was barely audible.

I pressed the receiver harder to my ear. "Is everything okay?"

Her bitter laugh was answer enough. "No. But I owe you an apology."

Rachel had morning classes today. Jimmy was working at his winery. That left me in the quiet bungalow, hating how defeated this strong, vibrant woman sounded.

I lay back and stared at the ecru ceiling. "You don't owe me anything, Sloane. I just wish I hadn't let it go so long. I should have told you sooner."

She sighed heavily. "I doubt it would have made a difference. It's funny, living your life with blinders on. Part of me believed you, when you came to my door. I'd had an inkling for a while, but I wasn't ready to hear it. Couldn't fathom my life without Thomas."

“Don’t blame yourself. I did for a while, when I went through it. It only makes things worse.”

Silence crackled through the line, then, “Men are such assholes.”

“Those who cheat should have to walk around with a shit emoji on their heads.” But I couldn’t picture Owen wearing the offensive accessory. Deep down, in my gut, I knew he hadn’t cheated on me, or on Tessa. Owen’s pain and desperation when explaining the situation hadn’t been fake, and the man practically bled loyalty. Yet I’d still bailed.

Sloane’s breathing grew labored. “I hate how stupid I feel. I thought maybe he’d fooled around a time or two, but the extent of it? How long it’s been going on? His business trips extended each year, he changed his phone password, and he worked late too often to be normal. But he always had an explanation, and I always bought it.” Her voice fell to whisper. “I’m not sure how I’ll ever trust a man again.”

“You deserve happiness, Sloane. When it’s the right person, you will.”

“I don’t know.”

Her despondent words echoed my morose thoughts. I *had* let my distrust in men taint what I’d had with Owen. Brandon had started working longer, too, near the end. He’d been more protective of his phone and privacy. The memory of my ignorance had nursed my insecurity.

Insecurities I’d projected onto Owen.

When I saw his truck at his apartment last Friday, after he said he’d be out, I assumed he’d lied to me, that he had a woman in his bed. When he explained the damning photographs, I wouldn’t listen. Caroline’s nasty text and Tessa’s diabolical package were bad, but I would have had a meltdown eventually. If he’d missed a date because he was working late, I’d have second-guessed him. If his battery had died on his phone, I’d have wondered why he wasn’t picking up, mind wandering, insecurity growing, until I snapped, just as Sloane worried she would.

My anxiety was ruining my life.

Sloane and I talked a short while longer, but I could barely focus. Queasiness clenched my stomach. We made plans to grab a coffee next week, and as soon as we hung up, I shot to my bare feet and paced a frantic line. I took deep breaths and a longer, harder look at myself.

Owen had proven his devotion time and again, but I couldn't see those photos for what they'd been—proof his ex-wife was a nasty, vengeful woman—because I'd been waiting for him to mess up the whole time.

Owen wasn't too good to be true. He was truly *good*.

Now here I was, another woman hurting him.

Shaken, I studied Rachel and Jimmy's bungalow, my safe haven the past five days. The large windows bathed the plants and overstuffed red sectional (and Kleenex and magazines) in sunlight. Stacks of her viticulture textbooks filled a bookcase next to her desk. Jimmy's badass motorcycle boots were at the front door, next to her Mary Janes. The couple also had a killer wine cellar in the lower level that had come in handy.

But my favorite was the framed quote hung in the entryway:

*"If you obey all the rules, you miss all the fun."* ~ Katharine Hepburn.

The space was warm and inviting, and I was thrilled Rachel had found contentment in her life. I'd only find my happy if I released the hurt I'd nurtured, quit assuming I wasn't capable of sustaining a healthy relationship. Owen wasn't Brandon. Trusting him would be so very hard, but living without him would be harder.

It *was* harder.

My mind clearer than it had been in weeks, I rescued my phone from the couch and went to pull up his name, only to find a text from him. The ceiling pressed closer. The walls inched toward me. It was like I was back in the Evil Bathroom, air trapped in my throat.

Swallowing hard, I read his message.

Owen: We need to talk.

I relaxed slightly. That better be the *I forgive you for being a moron* we need to talk, and not the *I need closure* we need to talk...unless he truly was seeking finality, wanting to put an official end to our relationship. It couldn't happen. Not like this. Not when I'd finally woken up and understood the extent of my baggage. And not the Samsonite carry-on variety. My issues would barely fit into a Tumi Alpha luggage set.

Rachel walked in as I was about to detonate. Eyes wide, she dropped her keys on her table by the door. "Why do you look radioactive?"

"I screwed up." So, so badly.

"Were you infomercial surfing again? Do I need to confiscate your credit card?"

"The Clever Cutter was a great purchase." The sauna pants were maybe over the top. And ugly. I had a problem. "This is an Owen emergency. He messaged."

She sat on her barstool and patted the one beside her. "Tell Auntie Rachel everything."

I rolled my eyes, but obliged. "I'm self-sabotaging."

Kicking my dangling feet like a child, I spewed my sad realization, reliving how I'd derailed my relationship. Each admission made my mistakes more blatant. Rachel sat in her chinos and ironed buttoned-down, nodding and listening. My chin trembled.

When I finished, she tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear. "You owe him an apology."

If he took me back, I'd owe him a kidney. "He was right to push me away. I mean, his mother abandoned him, his ex-wife is making his life hell, and I didn't stand by him. Why would he forgive me?" I spun my phone on the counter, my head spinning with it.

“Before you reach nuclear freak out, you should sit with this for a bit. I know you love him, and I’m pretty sure he loves you. But if you guys get back together, you have to trust him. Like I trust Jimmy. Like your mother trusts your father. Without that, it won’t work. You need to be sure you can give him all of you, for both your sakes.” When I didn’t reply, she added, “Gwen will be here Friday. We’ll have the weekend together, then you’ll be back in San Fran Monday. That’s another five days to get your head straight. Tell him you’ll talk then.”

“What if he decides I’m not worth waiting for?” Five days could be the difference between keeping him and losing him.

“He loves you, Ainsley. Give yourselves the time you both need.”

Unsure it was the right move, I flipped over my phone and typed.

Me: I’d like to talk. Meet Monday at noon at our picnic table?

I hit Send before I overthought it to death. Please be the right move.

Owen: I’ll be there.

The speed of his response buoyed my mood, but the reply was short. There were no sweet endearments. No clues as to how he felt.

It was the wrong move. Definitely wrong. I should have written more, apologized, grovelled. “I don’t need time. Time is silly. I’ll just tell him I’m madly in love with him and will never hurt him again and want to have his babies.”

Rachel swiped the phone from my hand. “Consider this confiscated.” She strutted toward the front door and ransacked my purse next, stealing my credit card. “And this. You’ll get them both back Monday. No rash decisions. Nothing will change in five days.”

So why did it feel like my vital organs were migrating to my throat?



My five-day sentence was a challenge. Gwen turned up on day two, and I pleaded with her to get my phone from Rachel. She compromised by returning my credit card, but the traitor parroted Rachel, claiming if I couldn't return to Owen with clear eyes and a full heart (*Friday Night Lights* forever) we'd be doomed to fail.

I was ready to open up to him, excessive baggage be damned, but they were right. Ten days apart was nothing in the scheme of life, and I hadn't fully decompressed from the past week's shock. It also gave me time to finally make my special gift for him.

So instead of professing my love to Owen, I worked on my website and drank and hiked and talked and laughed with the girls, beyond thankful to have them in my life.

Until Monday arrived and my ever-vigilant, supposed best friends still wouldn't give me my phone. I glowered at them. "You said five days. It's been five days."

Taller than me, Gwen held my phone in the air. "Now it's just fun. We have bets on when you'll start pulling out your hair."

I was about to launch myself at her, when my cell buzzed. We all froze. Then I lunged, but she used her CrossFit muscles to hold me at arm's length. She and Rachel crowded over *my* phone, the one not in *my* hands. They sighed in unison.

"He's such a dreamboat," Rachel said.

"Is it Owen?"

She grinned. "Yeah."

I reached for the tiny cellphone that housed my heart. "Give it here."

“Back off, buttercup. You still have two hours.” Gwen held it at distance, the screen facing me. “But you can read it.”

“This must be how Cinderella felt about her awful stepsisters.” My irritable tone slipped into a whisper as I read Owen’s text.

Owen: I can’t live without you.

My pulse pitter-pattered, tears gathering in my eyes as I clutched my throat. More bubbles appeared below, but Gwen pulled my lifeline away before I could glimpse his next message. “Are you trying to kill me?”

Instead of continuing to humor them, I attacked. I pounced on Gwen, tickling her armpits until my phone flew into the air. My dive to capture it ended with me face-first on the plush couch. “Victory!” I crowed. Then I ran.

I locked myself in the bathroom, cradling my one tether to the man I loved as though it were Waterford crystal. I devoured his words greedily.

Owen: I plan to melt my glass into one sheet and break it in two. Half for you. Half for me.

If there was any remaining doubt he was devoted to me, it vanished. I was his matching piece of glass, and he was mine.

I pulled the silver chain from around my neck, a delicate strand with his blue shard hanging from the end. The top of the glass was encased in wisps of wound silver wire. I’d found the glass in my pocket the day I’d driven here. Had kept it close, hoping it could help me see the light. The day he’d texted, I’d evaded Rachel and had descended on a jeweler in town, begging for a rush job.

Unable to contain the swelling of my emotions any longer, I texted him back.

Me: I’m so sorry.

Owen: Me too.

Me: I love you.

What the fuck?

I shouldn't have written it in a text. Those words were meant to inspire enraptured kissing and voracious sex. *Wild*, voracious make-up sex. And I sent them in a stupid text. There were no bouncing balls to hint at a reply. I couldn't see his face or read his body language. No wonder the girls had kept my phone from me. Total self-sabotage.

When the dots showed, I pressed my fist to my mouth.

Owen: I had to read that ten times. My heart's about to bust through my chest.

Mine was pumping as hard.

Me: Have we made up then?

Owen: Doesn't count until I've seen you naked.

Sign me up for that extracurricular activity.

Me: See you at 12.

Vibrating as fast as Blue Bunny, I unlocked the bathroom door to find my friends squished in the same chair. They were facing Rachel's computer and my yet-to-be-live website.

"Who gave you permission to creep my work?"

Rachel waved an impatient hand at me. "Shush. We're reading."

I was a minute from having a stroke. This was my grand finale. My swan song. My chance to leave a positive mark in women's lives. And my friends were analyzing it.

I could only hope my new business would bring me as much joy as learning about wine brought Rachel, as much fulfillment as working at the adoption agency afforded Gwen. I hoped when reality set in with Owen and me, we'd truly be able to move past this painful speedbump.

For now, I fidgeted as my friends studied my website. When their silence became oppressive, I said, “Tell me if it sucks, already.”

Gwen stood, nearly sending Rachel tumbling to the floor when her side of the desk chair dipped. She motioned me over. My friends flanked me as we studied my fledgling start-up.

## CHERISH

It was the seven-letter word for caring for something dear, namely ourselves. Pushing through the hard times—whether personal or health related—and finding beauty again. It also paid homage to the queen of reinvention herself, Madonna, whose music inspired many solo dance parties in front of my bedroom mirror, thanks to my mom’s CDs.

The homepage had a collage of client images, including one of Sherise at her son’s wedding, beaming in the blue halter dress that fit her curves like a glove. I had tiered packages from full closet overhauls, to accent bundles—affordable options where key purchases could elevate a wardrobe. I also offered style consultations, facilitating hair and makeup appointments.

My favorite was our Screw the Ex Special: *Let us melt down your wedding ring and turn it into the design of your choice!* I’d also planned to give each client a personal gift from Aazam’s Sweet Treats.

All I had to do was hit Publish.

Rachel kissed my cheek. “It’s wonderful.”

“So proud of you,” Gwen said.

I inhaled deeply, then sent my business into the world.

The marching band I’d expected didn’t show. No fireworks exploded. We stared at the unmoving screen, tapping our toes.

I shrugged. “I guess that’s that. Now you two mother hens need to clear the way so I can get to my man.”

Gwen did that observant thing of hers where she basically looked into my soul. “Do you trust him?”

“Yes.” Not a lick of hesitation.

Rachel did a little bounce. “Are you ready for love?”

I snickered. “That’s an Elton John song.”

“And your point is?”

“Yes, I’m ready—for him, for it all. I’m sure I’ll have my freak-out moments. We’ll just have to work through them. But if I don’t get in my car soon and kiss his beautiful face and neck and his entire body, I will implode.”

Gwen raised her hands in surrender. “I’d rather not witness that.” She swatted my behind. “Be gone with you.”



My drive to the Habitat build was a tad loopy. I belted out the words to every song I knew, not caring when another driver could see me. I danced in my seat. I was high. Crazed. Filled to the brim with my life changes and the knowledge that a super sexy man would soon get attacked by *moi*. The sight of his truck near the Habitat build had me humming the chorus to George Michael’s “I Want Your Sex.”

I nearly jammed my toe into the curb as I hurried out my door...but I paused.

I hadn’t visited the Habitat site in a while. People were milling about, none I recognized, but the first grouping of six townhouses had been freshly stuccoed in a mix of pastels, small patches of grass and bright green bushes warming up the exterior. I’d been coordinating the audio systems with Nick and Felipe, installation organized for a few weeks from now. Families would move in this spring.

I couldn’t believe my hands had helped build those walls, that I’d had a part in changing someone’s life. It also meant more knowing Anton had put his mark on the project. We hadn’t seen each other since becoming non-enemies, but we’d both contributed to the community, together.

Feeling swathed in warmth, I turned my attention to the playground at the end of the street. My wacky energy from the drive returned. Owen was over there. So close, yet so far.

I speed walked. I ran. I raced the blowing clouds up above. My first glimpse of him stole my breath. He was tall and broad and handsome, pacing restlessly in front of our picnic table. He must have sensed me. Or maybe he heard me call, “Get over here!”

His head whipped my way, then he was moving, too. His jog pushed into a run that had us crashing into each other as he crushed me to his chest and spun me around. “So fucking sorry.” His fingers dug into my ribs, his other hand tangling in my hair as he hugged the stuffing out of me. “I’m sorry as hell I let you walk out that door. Sorry I brought Tessa into your life.”

I pawed at his back and shoulders, wanting to touch all of him at once, but there was something I had to do first. Still clutching him tight, I said, “I’m the one who owes you an apology. I should have trusted you. I *do* trust you.”

“But I should have given you time. Not shut down.”

Our hearts were pressed close, pounding out our apologies. “Can we kiss now?”

His rumbling chuckle vibrated through me. Angling his head down, his hungry lips went to work, coaxing mine open. His breath was hot, our mouths and tongues moving in sync. Everything about him felt *right*, destined. He tasted like goodness and loyalty and the type of man you fought for. Our level of PDA shot from mild to arrest worthy.

Panting, my construction hunk pulled away. “Come sit for sec.”

“But the kissing?”

He licked his lips. “Doll, we’re not done with the kissing, but we need to talk.”

Ignoring my grumbles, Owen led me to our picnic table. He straddled the bench and had me sit opposite him, our bent knees touching. “I really am sorry, Ainsley. As much as I’m

dying to make-out and get you home, I need you to hear me, *believe me*. Giving up on us was the wrong choice.”

Such simple words, the candor behind them a balm to my healing wounds. I pushed my fingers into the front of his thick hair, letting my hands drag over his scalp, down the back of his neck and shoulders, coming to rest on his firm chest. “I know you are, but this is on me. I assumed the worst. Even though I knew you’d never cheat on me, I couldn’t stop my mind from going there. Never again, though. I trust you.” I pulled my necklace from under my cashmere sweater and placed the weight of it against my thudding heart. “I love you.”

His forehead crumpled, emotion gathering in his eyes. He touched the glass, a gentle slide of his fingers down the pendant, then he gripped my ass and hauled me onto his lap. I linked my legs around his back.

“I love you,” he whispered. A bruising kiss followed, leaving me breathless. “So damn much.”

I needed more, those three words over and over. “Say it again.”

Tugging me closer, he nosed my cheek. “So damn much.”

I swatted his thick bicep. “Not that part, smartass.”

“Oh. Okay.” He nodded, a playful grin spreading. “I think I know what you’re after.” Reverently, he cupped my cheeks. “I”—he nipped to my earlobe—“love”—he dragged his lips along my jaw—“you”—he covered my face with a thousand soft kisses.

I sighed. “That’s better.” The urge to shred his clothing lessened, those words and his strong arms my perfect salve. I snuggled in closer. “My website is live.”

“I’m so proud of you,” he said into my hair. “I have no doubt you’ll succeed.”

I sure hoped so. “I’ll advertise at gyms and salons, places women go when stressed. Tap into my target market like we discussed. I still have a few key clients who’ll keep me afloat,

but I fired the rest. It's a risk, but I'm happier for it." Like I was happier for allowing myself to find love.

He drew lazy patterns on my back. "I nearly finished that second maple table this week. Barely slept."

Guilt bloomed. "I'm sick that I left you, especially after what *she* did." She Who Must Not Be Named. "Can we throw her in jail? Send her on the first trip to Mars?"

"Unlikely. And it doesn't matter. She doesn't matter. She's done her worst, and we survived. But..." His hands paused their intimate strokes. "I have something to ask you. It might freak you out, and I want you to understand it's not something I want now, but it was an issue for me in the past. So I think I need to be clear about it this time, with you."

That didn't sound good. His heavy exhale when I leaned back to gauge his weighted expression didn't inspire confidence, either. "Consider me freaking out."

His attention shifted past me, to the jungle gym. It wasn't busy—a couple of tykes mucked about on the slide. "I want kids, Ainsley. Not anytime soon, but what we have is far from casual, and I can't get serious with someone without making that clear."

*He wants kids. Kids with me, one day.* How could I have questioned his fidelity? Believed, even for a second, his love wasn't true?

Awash with relief, I laughed. Giddy delight rolled through my belly in an uncontrollable wave. Owen caught my crazy, both of us laughing at absolutely nothing. Finally, I wiped my eyes. "We'll have ten, if that's what you want. They'll be stylish and read smarty-pants books, and...*oh*, the dancing. Two will be ballet stars, one will do the Hip Hop video circuit, and the rest will take the Broadway and ballroom worlds by storm. They'll make a reality TV series about us."

He wasn't laughing any longer. He pressed his forehead to mine. "I love you, Ainsley."

I bit my lip. "I love you so much."

There was no describing this thick swelling in my heart. I wouldn't want to, anyway. It was private. A slice of paradise just for us.

I inched my hands down his pecs, over the wonderland of his abs, to his waistband. I traced the ridge of his belt toward his back and dipped my hands inside his briefs, grazing the top of his fine behind. "To prove my valor, I plan to torture Emmett until he tells me what your tattoo means, then I'll torture *you* with the knowledge. Use it to demand sexual favors."

"How does messing with my mind prove your valor?"

"Just go with it."

He unleashed an impish smirk. "He told me, this week."

Ex-squeeze me? "How did I miss that?"

"I think he felt bad for me."

I squeezed my legs tighter around his back. "And?" When his smirk widened, I fisted the front of his shirt and pulled him close. "Now's not the time to hold out on me, cowboy. My form of punishment involves lack of sex."

He slapped my ass. "I'll take it under advisement. How about we go to your place and get naked?"

The bugger ignored my ultimatum, but my willpower waned. I was weak, needy. "Will you tell me eventually?"

Keeping me clutched to his chest, he kicked his leg over the bench and stood. He walked us to our cars while I did my best koala impression, legs hooked around his middle. "If you stick around, maybe."

I pressed my face into his warm neck. "I'm not going anywhere."

# EPILOGUE



TWO MONTHS LATER

AINSLEY

*A six-letter word for a place of ideal perfection.*

I grinned at my crossword clue, an easy one that wouldn't require any cheating. Before I could type my answer, Rachel elbowed me. "They're finally starting."

"About time." I pocketed my phone and watched the group of fit men slap one another's backs as they spilled onto the soccer field. "It's a hunk buffet."

Gwen snorted from my other side. "You two aren't allowed to indulge."

"But we can look," Rachel said.

And we did. Thick thighs abounded. Broad backs filled out the yellow or blue shirts on either team, long socks suctioned to defined calves. There was one particular set of calves I was searching for—the pair attached to my favorite hunk...whose ass was being squeezed by another man.

His perverted brother flashed me a wink.

I glared at the jerk. "Emmett needs to get over the ass grab."

Rachel scrunched her adorable nose. “Why does he even do it?”

“Because he knows it annoys me. It’s always the left cheek, the one with the tattoo. Neither of them will tell me what it means.”

“I still can’t believe Owen hasn’t let it slip.”

“I can’t believe we haven’t pantsed him yet to see that sucker.” Gwen shook her head in disgust.

My scowl deepened. “He’s staying mum. I figured it’s better to focus my efforts on Emmett. He’s likely to crack sooner.”

“Good luck with that one.” Cameron climbed the small set of bleachers, joining us for the morning festivities. He scanned the field. “It’s a hunk buffet.”

My words exactly. “You and I share a brain.”

Gwen sat straighter. “Good thing I’m the only one of us available. Considering how long it’s been, I might need the all-you-can-eat variety.”

Rachel and I traded hopeful glances. Gwen had been on a break from men for over a year, focusing instead on work and CrossFit and her other life-threatening hobbies. She also hadn’t been out much since her mother had passed away last month. The end had come suddenly, so swiftly Gwen hadn’t spoken with her since their last fight. Gwen claimed she’d come to terms with the loss, accepting that her “mother” had gained said title by blood alone, not through any sort of proper relationship. She’d said losing her had felt like reading about a celebrity death in a gossip rag—a moment of sadness, followed by life moving on.

I patted her thigh. “If you go the buffet route, make sure the men all wear their *bibs* before entering your *restaurant*.”

Cameron cracked up. “I need a book of Ainsley-isms.”

I could totally rock that book. “We’ll call it *Musings on the Love Glove*.” Not that I had time to write such brilliance. My next two months were fully booked.

Aside from my growing client list, my weekly Habitat shift took priority, and I needed to add a before-and-after page to my website, showing off recent makeovers. One in particular would be front and center: Sloane. She'd progressed from a size celery to a size Italian eggplant and looked stunning in her less-conservative wardrobe. She was my ideal client, ready to shed her past with a new look and a new lease on life. She'd also made sure Thomas hadn't slandered my reputation.

I hadn't let her pay for my services.

The referee blew his whistle, and we all enjoyed the view as the throng of male magnificence ran and grunted and dripped sweat. We cheered. We leered. We had a blast.

"Have you ladies made birthday plans?" Cameron bent forward, elbows planted on his knees. He was a handsome devil, his mix of ink and fifties flair deliciously sexy.

Rachel sat between us. She leaned back so we could all talk. "We're keeping it simple. Going to a bar. Just close friends."

Namely him and Emmett, Owen and Jimmy, Rachel, Gwen, and me. Our little gang. Rachel and Cameron chatted about grabbing dinner beforehand while I watched the tail end of the match, but my mind was stuck on our birthday and all it meant.

I couldn't believe it had been a year. *Almost* a year. We'd be turning twenty-eight tomorrow, April 12<sup>th</sup>. Two years from thirty.

I'd never been this excited for our yearly celebration. Ringing in the occasion with Owen made it special. I planned to kiss him silly when the clock chimed twelve. I would also thank my lucky stars I'd made last year's resolution to become a better person, and had worked off my *derrière* to realize it.

Like spring cleaning, uncluttering one area of my life only made me want to streamline the next section, and the next. My work no longer made me feel like a bottom-feeder. I'd released my guilt over Anton. Owen and I had returned to each other, better, stronger. Ridiculously in love. Even my parents were

doing better. Granted, my father's job at the auto plant wasn't my doing, but it gave him purpose each day, put pride into his voice. He and Mom no longer needed my help covering their mortgage.

Rachel had found her happy, too. She'd fulfilled her resolution and now had Jimmy and viticulture school.

Our happiness had my focus drifting to my right, to Gwen who was barely watching the soccer match. Her gaze was glazed, like she wasn't actually seeing it. A cheer rose up around us, shouts and claps blowing into the warm spring air. Gwen didn't flinch.

She was the strongest of us, could run a marathon, probably karate chop a cement block. She had the brass balls to jump out of airplanes. But losing her mother had been tough, and she seemed lonely these days, still enjoying her job, but...pensive.

I squeezed her thigh. "What was your birthday wish?" She'd never once said.

She didn't face me, just stared at a faraway point in front of her. "To know who my father was."

I pressed my hand to my throat, understanding sinking in. She'd asked her mother while she'd been sick and had gotten stonewalled. With her gone, she'd never know. She wouldn't find the peace that came with the knowledge she'd sought her entire life.

I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. "I'm sorry."

"Thanks." Her attention settled on her lap. "I'm still going through her house, hoping to find a hidden shoebox or something with a clue, but..." She shrugged. Gwen wore a ribbed tank top that showed off her toned arms and kick-ass physique, but inside she was soft, likely sinking at the prospect of never learning this one truth.

"I can help. Come by this afternoon maybe."

She didn't acknowledge my offer. "I want you to know how happy I am for you and Rachel. I know you stuck with

your resolutions. It's impacted your lives, and you both deserve the best."

My DKNY-loving heart cracked. Gwen was no less deserving. More so for the year she'd endured...and the year wasn't quite over. "We still have until tomorrow night to fulfill your wish, not that the timeline really matters. But we'll scour your mother's place anyway. Tear it apart, if need be."

She shrugged me off. "You're sweet, but I'll pass. It was a silly wish to begin with."

Her eyes narrowed, focusing on a group of players preparing to take the field. They all jogged out, except for one man stretching on the sidelines. Gwen's attention didn't move from him. Owen and Jimmy had finished shaking hands with their opposing team and joined the guy. I had zero clue who'd won—aside from us who got to watch all the hotness—but I was more curious about the man Gwen was eyeing, especially when Jimmy and Owen clapped him on the back.

Gwen's jaw nearly dislocated. "Holy shit."

I squinted, checking the guy for familiarity. He was a looker with tanned skin and disheveled dark hair, short on the sides and longer up top. His toned body gave Owen a run for his money, but nothing about him rang any bells. "Do you know him?"

All she said was "Holy shit" again.

Cameron walked down the bleachers to join Emmett. Rachel leaned toward us. "Do you guys know who won?"

"No clue," I said, my attention fixed on my incredulous friend. "But Gwen is having a meltdown."

Rachel assessed Gwen's open mouth and unblinking eyes. "Do we need to call a doctor?"

I snapped my fingers in front of her face. "What's with the catatonic state?"

"It's him," was all she managed.

Again, I stared at the boys, all of them grinning as if they were old buddies. "Him who?"

“August.”

Rachel and I drew a collective breath. *The August*. The neighbor Gwen had spent the majority of her childhood with, chasing each other across their joined yards. The one who'd taught her how to play guitar and had dragged her to his boisterous family dinners so she could escape her depressing home. The guy she'd been in love with.

“Was he that hot when you knew him?” Hot with a capital H.

“He's filled out,” she murmured.

His gaze shifted, dragging toward us as though sensing our attention. The instant he saw Gwen, he froze. She squeaked. He opened his mouth, then closed it. Something dark passed over his eyes, but Gwen was already on her feet. “I need to go.”

My usually fearless friend bolted from her seat, disappearing around the bleachers.

Rachel scratched her knee. “That was odd.”

“Understatement. She's hiding something.” I'd always sensed there was more to the August story than Gwen had let on. She'd given us the basics of their childhood and teen years, but when she'd skim over their relationship afterward, she'd always clam up and her eyes would get glassy. “If she doesn't spill the details, we'll pry them out of her.”

With alcohol.

We stood, dusted off our behinds, and headed toward our sweaty men. Jimmy and Owen were at their duffle bags, chugging Gatorade. When Owen saw me, he prowled my way.

I held up my hands. “No. You're gross.”

Unconcerned I was wearing an adorable Miu Miu floral dress, he wrapped his big, glistening arms around me. “Deal with it.”

Unable to resist, I sunk into his embrace. Some things were more important than fashion. “Great game.”

“You even know who won?”

“I did. I got to watch your ass and thighs flex. It was quite a show.” I pressed my nose into his drenched shirt. His pungent musk of salt and man mingled with his usual apple pie. “I’d like to bottle you.”

He released me far enough to plant a soft kiss on my lips. “You’ll have to settle on living with me.”

Excited, I did a jig and twirled in his arms. When he asked last week, I almost rented a truck that night to move my stuff pronto. I couldn’t wait to blend our lives more permanently. “You’ll need to build an addition with a separate walk-in closet for me.”

“Might be tough, timewise. Ellen messaged to say she sold two of my pieces. I need to get to work.”

I smacked his rock-hard chest. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.” He couldn’t hide the pride in his bright eyes, and the timing was perfect. She Who Must Not Be Named had signed the final papers on their house sale and divorce recently. Owen could stop paying his lawyer and invest more fully in his growing business.

I beamed at him. “Your designs will take San Francisco by storm.”

“Here’s hoping. And if I find time, I was thinking of building us a dance room. Solid wood floors. Mirrors so I can watch you twirl.”

Or so I could watch other things. “Only if we can dance naked.”

His answering grunt had my body humming, as did the way he palmed my ass. He moved to gather his bag, and I searched the soccer field, scanning the new group of men sweating it out on the field. When I spotted Gwen’s old crush, I tugged Owen’s arm. “How do you know August?”

He followed my line of sight and smiled. “He played soccer with us when we were in high school. On the California Regional League. Great guy. Haven’t seen him since. Why?”

I could share Gwen's state of shock and their mysterious history, or I could use this tidbit in my favor. "I have gossip. Tell me what your tattoo means, and I'll spill the details."

"Nope."

Damn him. "You're no fun."

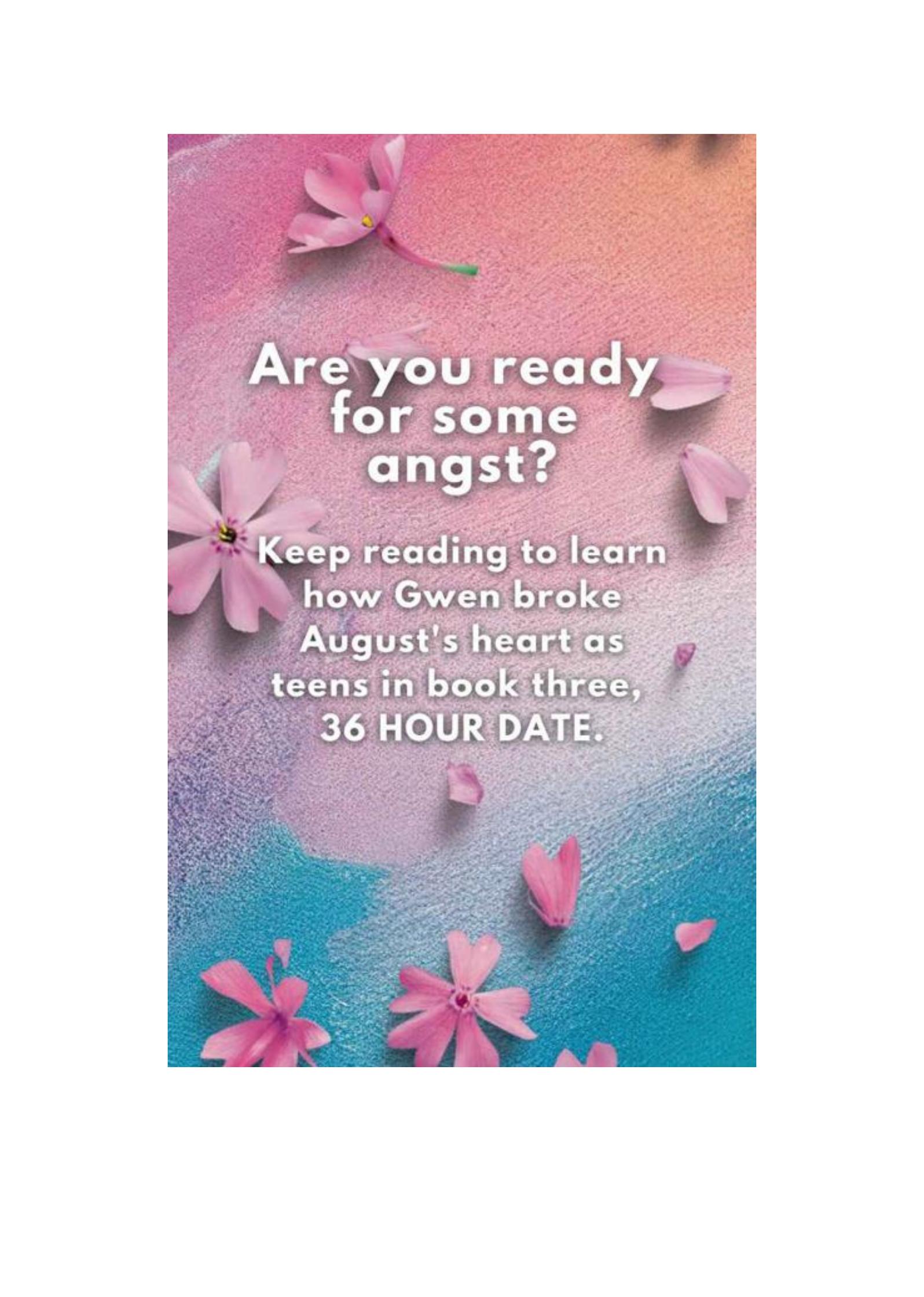
"So you've said." He linked our hands, and we walked to his truck, the sun high, my spirits higher. He opened my door for me and helped me into my side, the eternal gentleman. Once I'd clicked my seat belt in place, he brushed my hair from my face. "You get more beautiful every day."

Heart, meet the moon.

Any other man, and I'd laugh at the cheesy sentiment, but this was Owen. A romantic who believed in finding his other half, and reminded me of his love daily. He kissed me hard and true. I nipped his bottom lip. "Us," I said.

His brows pulled together. "What?"

"Nothing." I shoved him out the door and pulled my phone from my bag. The writers of this crossword clue may have had *Utopia* in mind for their answer, but I knew better. The true answer was two letters. One word. My place of ideal perfection was wherever Owen and I were, together. Utopia was Us.

The background is a textured surface with a color gradient from light pink at the top to a vibrant teal at the bottom. Scattered throughout are several pink flowers and individual petals. One flower is at the top center, another is on the left side, and two are at the bottom. Numerous petals are scattered across the surface, some near the flowers and others floating in the background.

**Are you ready  
for some  
angst?**

**Keep reading to learn  
how Gwen broke  
August's heart as  
teens in book three,  
36 HOUR DATE.**





# 36 HOUR DATE

KELLY SISKIND

# PROLOGUE



## **NINE YEARS AGO**

Aka Ground Zero for Gwen's Worst Terrible Fuck-up

GWEN

Dictators and loan sharks needed to rethink their torture methods. Sure, waterboarding and sleep deprivation could break a man. Pulling out fingernails and smashing kneecaps were reliable interrogation techniques. But if you really wanted to make someone suffer, to reach into their chests and yank out their proverbial hearts, simply force them to scroll through Facebook.

All seemed innocent at first. I sat on my too-hard chair and stared at my laptop, ignoring the Hello Kitty stickers affixed by the previous owner. The usual images floated by:

*Fake smile.*

*Fake smile.*

*Kissy face.*

*Cat playing piano.*

*Drunk shirtless dude.*

My attention darted between my laptop's flipping snapshots and my silent Blackberry, a cup of Jägermeister poised at my lips. Jägermeister was the butthole

of birthday drinks. It tasted like cough syrup and bad decisions. It was a reminder of the bile-marinated blackout that would forever remain unspoken. An event that would *not* be repeated tonight.

Yet here I was, drinking Jäger, because underage beggars couldn't be choosers, especially at 10 p.m. on my nineteenth birthday, while alone in my apartment, wondering why my best friend hadn't texted me. The fact that we hadn't spoken in over a year should have been a clue.

I sipped the Jäger and grimaced.

*Fake smile.*

*Faker smile.*

*Pouty face.*

*Cutest baby koala on the planet.*

*Drunk frat boy...in a diaper.*

And how did Facebook know which bra I was wearing? I peeked into the front of my gray V-neck and back at the sidebar advertisement. That was seriously creepy. And depressing. The black lace looked miles better on the model than on my less-endowed 34Bs, but the sight had me imagining my breasts and my former best friend's large hands, our naked bodies, and a whole lot of heat.

A needy moan slipped past my lips.

Since the man in question had forgotten my birthday and had probably blocked my number, that particular scenario was as likely as me wearing pink nail polish. Not that I deserved a guy like August Cruz.

I poured another shot into my Badass Bitch mug and did the thing I pretended I wasn't going to do: I clicked on August's timeline.

A new profile photo filled my computer screen, and I bit my lip. The most pathetic sigh deflated my posture. His wavy dark hair was shorter these days, clipped at the sides and messily styled. His glasses were different—thicker frames than he used to wear, obscuring the gold flecks in his hazel

eyes. He seemed to have bulked up, too. Unless his Lawn Enforcement Officer T-shirt had shrunk.

His clothing choice exacerbated my tipsy melancholy.

Had he worn that shirt because I'd given it to him? Did it remind him of me nipping at his heels and tossing clippings at his face as he'd cut our neighborhood lawns? Odds are it was nothing more than a comfortable relic—a T-shirt that would wind up in the trash one day, forgotten and cast away. Like me. Unless he'd consciously chosen to post the image, hoping I'd see it.

My next sigh was more heartsick than wistful.

I'd been down this unrequited-love road before. I'd walked it so often a permanent path had been forged behind my stinging eyes. I missed how August's rumbling laugh would infect me with giggles. I missed the way he'd dribble a soccer ball around me in an athletic blur. How he'd sit behind me, arms and legs around my torso, teaching me to play guitar.

I missed the only person who could soothe me when my mother's anger had burned through my lonely house.

These thoughts weren't new, but his profile photo and that T-shirt jostled them, a violent shove that shook my foundation. A strange awareness overtook me. He *must* have chosen that image on purpose, knowing I'd see it and think of us. He *must* have launched that sign through cyberspace so I'd catch it. It seemed obvious now—*Jägermeister obvious*, but whatever: August must miss me as much as I missed him.

I had to reach out and tell him I understood him and his subliminal message, the way only I could. Considering his stupid girlfriend, Kayla Morgan, was evil incarnate and the reason everything with August had gone to shit, she probably treated him like crap. I should have singed her blond hair in chem lab when I'd had the chance. Instead I'd let her vicious words infect my mind, poisoning all thoughts of August.

We'd been friends back then, Kayla and me. At least I thought we'd been. *You drag him down*, she'd told me. *You're too needy. He pities you.*

Her words had hit their mark, feeding my insecurity. Fear of being a charity case had caused me to curl in on myself. Since I didn't do things half-assed, I shoved August away with the quietest silent treatment known to man...and Kayla, my supposed friend, gave him all the noise I'd sucked from his world.

She was still on his profile page. Still his girlfriend. I snarled at her picture filling my computer screen and grabbed my phone before my Jäger courage wore off.

Heart pounding in my throat, I pulled up August's name and rushed off a text. My fingers trembled as I typed.

Me: I'm sorry.

August: Who is this?

His quick reply almost had me launching my cell. My pulse went haywire, my hands too shaky to reply. But this was good. This was *right*. Of course he replied promptly. He wore the T-shirt! Fate was finally on our side.

Although he'd only been ten minutes away the past year, studying at SFSU while I killed myself cracking the books at San Francisco's City College, he'd felt so far. Not tonight. Not now.

I took a breath, then two more. I blinked away my Jäger fog and steadied my hands.

Me: Hardy har har.

August: No. Seriously. The only Gwen I know hasn't spoken to me in a year and a half.

His words were a knife in my chest, and the same wave of remorse I'd battled since I'd cut August from my life crashed over me. This wasn't the time to cower, though, the way I had the past year. This was the time to take charge of my life, beginning with an apology.

Me: I'm sorry I was a bitch our last year of high school.

August: Which time?

That knife twisted deeper.

Me: Every time. All the time.

God, I wished high school had been the raging party promised in classic eighties movies. Instead it had consisted of me sinking into a jealous despair as I'd battled my mother's dictatorship and had struggled to get into college. I'd worked two jobs. Student loan applications had dogged me. All the while, my neighbor and best friend had coasted through life, then and now.

August's mother loved him. He had a father he actually knew and siblings to bond with, including an identical twin who had his back. Grades came easy to him. His soccer scholarship meant paying for college wasn't a stress. He played a mean guitar and had a crowd of hangers-on—friends who fed on his cool factor like pilot fish catching scraps from a powerful shark.

August had always had everything. I'd had nothing in high school but him.

Now I didn't even have that.

August: You ignored me. Stopped returning my calls and texts.

Infection set into my festering wound.

Me: I know. I'm the worst person.

August: Not good enough. You don't get off with a weak apology. What you did fucking hurt.

A heart transplant would be needed now. Or a heart amputation. Was that even a thing? Could a person live without her heart? Remorse fisted my rotting organ.

I knew I'd hurt August—I'd destroyed myself in the process—but hearing it firsthand had the burn in my eyes turning liquid.

He deserved some answers.

Me: I was jealous. Your life kept getting better, and mine got harder. I felt like I was slipping into your shadow. I was resentful.

August: What kind of bullshit is that? I never treated you as less. You were the most important person in my life, and you walked away like I meant nothing.

A tear leaked out, but I dashed it away. I wasn't a crier. I never let my emotions overrun me. Unless August was involved. He was also right: my actions may have made sense back then, but they had been a load of bullshit. The notion of dragging him down with my depressing life and crappy situation had seemed worse than shutting him out. It had been the wrong choice.

But it wasn't why I'd kept those invisible bricks stacked between us.

My fingers moved before I could stop them, before I could take a breath and collect myself and decide on the smart thing to say.

Me: It was also because you started dating Kayla.

I stared at my sent message and smacked my forehead with the heel of my hand. *What the hell is wrong with me?* There was no ctrl-alt-deleting that horrifying confession. My stomach twisted, courtesy of the Jäger and my stupid fingers.

Kayla Morgan was still his girlfriend. Facebook reminded me of that painful fact daily. And I just kind of admitted I'd had the hots for him.

August didn't post much, but Kayla loved tagging him at every opportunity: selfies with her arm around his waist, candids of him studying or sleeping, captioned with things like: *I tuckered him out*. I would then "caption" my rude gestures with colorful expletives, all shouted at the screen. (Proof of Facebook's torture potential.) My roommate, Clean

Your Damn Area Claire, would make a throaty sound and roll her eyes, then tell me to *clean my damn area*.

I stared at my silent phone, bouncing my heel, chewing my lip, wishing I could reverse time and suck that message back into my traitorous fingers.

His eventual reply didn't help.

August: What does Kayla have to do with this?

Now he wanted me to bleed for him, eviscerate the guts of my hidden affections. All I managed was a partial truth.

Me: I was jealous of her too. Because of her, we spent less time together. It wasn't rational. I'm sorry and I miss you.

I should have been more honest, admitted the depths of my feelings for him back then. My feelings for him now. Regret knotted my noodley insides as I waited for his reply. I contemplated moving to Mars or the jungles of Africa, a place where Facebook and stupid crushes wouldn't derail my life. My phone vibrated with August's reply.

August: You should never have dated Jared. Things would be very different now.

Holy hell.

Did that mean he'd wanted me in high school, too? Had we both read each other wrong? Jared and his leather jacket had been a distraction and nothing else, even though he'd barely kept me from fantasizing about August. The effort had been so dismal I'd broken up with Jared during prom.

Could I have spent that time kissing August's perfect lips instead of inhaling Jared's Axe Body Spray?

I typed a frantic reply, then deleted each letter. This was big. Huge. Like "winning all the blue jelly beans in a blue jelly bean counting competition" huge.

I'd been in Intro to Psychology with August's twin brother, Finch, all semester, staring at him with unhealthy longing.

Aside from sharing August's dark hair, ridiculous bone structure, and gold-flecked hazel eyes, my belly had never flipped around him. The hairs on my neck had never shivered. That hadn't stopped me from ogling Finch, pretending and wishing he were August—the only man I'd ever truly *wanted*.

Up until one minute ago, I was sure my August ship had sailed, any chance with him destroyed by my childish behavior, but he was staring at his phone now, somewhere in San Francisco, not far from me, waiting on my reply.

This was do or die. This was the shot I never took.

This was my perfect birthday wish come true.

Holding my breath, I wrote out a careful reply, ensuring no typos waylaid my intentions. Brutal honesty was what this called for. Jäger honesty.

Me: I dated Jared because you hooked up with Kayla. I had feelings for you back then and couldn't be around you guys.

I reread my reply. It didn't say how I *still* had feelings for him. Massive, crushing feelings. But it was more than I'd ever admitted. I swallowed hard and sent my heart through cyberspace.

One second passed. Two lumbered by. Five, ten, *fifteen* seconds dragged.

Heart pummeling my chest, I shot to my feet and paced. My eyes darted wildly, unable to focus on the guitar neck protruding from under my bed or my overflowing laundry basket or my King Kong Green Day poster. I felt like a science experiment, all vibrating molecules and firing synapses, a cataclysmic event away from full meltdown.

No message answered me. Not a one. The air in my lungs turned to glue. If I had a paper bag, I'd breathe into it.

Unsure what to do, I plunked down on my chair and scrolled through Facebook, a futile attempt to distract myself. It was either that or fill my bathtub with Jäger and go for a swim. The flipping images blurred, one annoying smiling face

after another, until one particular face had my mouse stilling and my eyes bugging.

*Kayla.* Kayla tagging August in one of her flirty posts.

I wanted to slap my laptop shut and forget I'd ever sent that text or opened this Pandora's Box of awful, but I couldn't stop from leaning closer and studying the image. The glue in my lungs hardened into cement. I blinked several times, but Kayla still filled the screen. Her hand faced me, a band on her wedding finger.

The comment above read: *Guess who got a promise ring?*



Dazed and confused (not in the good way), I pushed into The Barking Owl. The student bar was jam-packed, sweaty bodies abundant, heat and pop tunes stuffing the pulsating room. An elbow jabbed me. Someone used my shoulders to keep from falling. Even in the oppressive space, I was relieved to be away from my computer and treasonous phone.

The second Kayla's post had sunk in, I'd hidden my Blackberry. There'd been no need to read whatever reply August would send. The sweet guy he was, he'd for sure let me down gently, and I'd marinate in my embarrassment, followed by a therapy session with my pals Ben & Jerry.

Better to cry on Jack Daniels' shoulder than poor Ben's.

"Gwen!" A waving hand caught my eye. When I noticed the hand was attached to Finch, I cursed the birthday gods for making this the suckiest birthday in the history of sucky birthdays.

My mother's curt phone call this morning had been as warm as a polar bear's ass. I used to get a yearly birthday card from my aunt, but those had vanished when I'd turned twelve. My grandparents pretended I didn't exist, and I'd just confessed my love to a boy who'd already given his girlfriend *a promise ring*. A freaking promise ring. Like it was 1950.

Now I had to spend the night looking at his identical twin.

A Jäger-bath and Ben & Jerry's chaser sounded better and better, but that involved actual effort.

Grumbling, I maneuvered toward Finch. Not an easy feat. A foot from my goal, some oaf in a Warriors jersey stumbled and dumped half his beer over my boobs.

"What the hell?" I attempted to shove him off, but the giant barely budged.

"Sorry about your shirt." His sleazy smirk suggested he wasn't particularly sorry.

I pinched the front of my sodden V-neck, the thin fabric fighting me as I peeled it off my chest. I could now add wet T-shirt contestant to this year's birthday of awesome. "Next time you wanna waste your beer, pour it over your head."

His lewd smirk graduated to vulgar. "It's not a waste if I get to suck it off you."

College students sure were classy.

Rolling my eyes, I flipped him the bird and squeezed toward Finch's spot at the bar. Considering most students crammed into the overheated room were underage, the San Francisco fake ID racket must have been thriving. Tonight mine was a godsend.

Finch squeezed my hip and raised his voice over the music. "Glad you made it."

I peered at him, unsure why he seemed to be on his own. "Did we have plans?"

"You didn't get my text?"

If it had been sent after I'd humiliated myself with his brother, his message would be buried with that damning evidence. "I haven't checked my phone in a bit."

"Then I guess this is fate, and I get to buy you a birthday drink."

I tried to smile at his sweet effort. When we were kids, he'd raised hell with August and me, but as we'd gotten older, August would often tell him to get lost. Finch would sulk, but

I'd been too focused on his brother to insist he tag along. Alone time with August had been a valuable commodity.

The past year and a half, though, after having cut August from my life, Finch had been more present. The two of us were at the same school now. He'd make an extra effort to check in on me, inviting me to lunch, the library. He and August seemed to have drifted since high school, but my childish silent treatment meant I couldn't ask August why, and there was an unspoken rule between Finch and me: August was a classified subject. Any mention of him or his name would disqualify our friendship.

A friendship I'd begun to count on. Finch even remembered my birthday.

"What can I get you?" he asked.

"Shot of Jäger."

He cringed. "Who the hell drinks Jäger?"

"I do, apparently." Because Jäger was the butthole of birthday drinks, and today was a butthole of a birthday. "I should order a double."

His gaze dropped briefly to my wet T-shirt, to the now-visible black bra that had looked miles better on the Facebook model. He leaned closer. "Are you drunk, Gwen Hamilton?"

I met him the rest of the way, our noses an inch apart. "Not wasted enough."

The people and music and laughter swirled around us, so loud and distracting that for a second I was sure it was August's Roman nose nearly touching mine, his lips within biting distance. His scruffy jaw. His firm chest. But there was no scar on Finch's chin. August's scar had been acquired the night we'd snuck into the abandoned Wheeler home. Finch didn't have an untamable lick of hair that always shot heavenward or callused fingers from endless guitar sessions. He hadn't written songs for me while lying in the grass and staring at the sky.

But Finch was good for a laugh.

“You’re lucky you found me.” He pretended to tighten an invisible necktie. “We may have grown up neighbors, but I don’t think you know I have a PhD in intoxication.”

I rubbed my palms together in eager anticipation. “Do tell, Dr. Cruz.”

“Well, if you’re aiming for *sad* wasted, I’d suggest we start you off with tequila shots, followed by a keg of beer. If it’s giddy wasted you’re after, Long Island Iced Tea should do the trick.”

“I was thinking more pissed-off wasted.” Insane wasted. *Furious* wasted.

If I hadn’t been so pathetically insecure during high school, I could be getting giddy wasted with August, instead of shooting the shit with his brother. The horrible choice to cut August off was a wake-up call if I’d ever heard one. Never again would I let a missed opportunity slip by. I wouldn’t coast through life, cowering at challenges, afraid to rock the boat. I would scare myself. I would push my boundaries. I would make life my bitch.

Finch nodded sagely. “If pissed-off wasted is your mission, then stick with the nasty Jäger.”

I almost did just that, but drinking more would dull this painful ache. I deserved to suffer every jab and twinge, each unforgiving pang. This was my fault. I should have admitted my feelings to August years ago.

Instead of walking the easy road of inebriation and oblivion, I ordered a Red Bull.

An insane amount of sugar-laced caffeine later, I stood in the crowded bar feeling more alone than when I’d been at home. The string of Red Bulls had done their job. I was painfully sober, and my revved brain kept reliving every different decision that could have resulted in a different outcome. Not this crappy outcome.

I was angry at myself. I was angry at August. And Finch was here for the entire show, doing his Finch thing, teasing my surly scowl and telling god-awful knock-knock jokes until I

cracked a smile. Some song about booties blared. Two chicks acted out the lyrics, putting on a show for the bar. August barely glanced at them.

Dammit. Finch. *Finch, Finch, Finch.*

I kept doing that—thinking, wishing he was his brother.

Finch and his easy grin were facing me, like they had been all night. His chest rubbed my arm as he yelled in my ear about his summer backpacking plans, his voice battling against the loud tunes. I nodded automatically, barely hearing him.

Warriors jersey dude, who hadn't passed out yet, danced suggestively while ogling the bootie girls. The giant waste of space tripped into me again, sending my clutched Red Bull to the ground. Finch glared at him. Frustrated, I bent down to retrieve the fallen can being kicked to-and-fro like a pinball. Finch had the same instinct. At the same time.

Our heads smacked together.

“Fuck.” I pressed my palm to my forehead.

“I'm not sure it'll help with the headache, but we could try.”

We could...*what-the-what?*

Finch and I were crouched inches from a sticky floor covered in spilled beer and pretzel bits, a forest of legs surrounding our shoulders, and he was eyeing me like he wanted a closer inspection of my black bra.

*What the hell?*

I was strung out on Red Bull, my heart pounding a mile a minute, and my vision turned hazy. Blurred with sadness. I found myself craving more contact. Touch. Comfort in someone's arms. No matter how hard I looked at Finch, he didn't become August—the only person I wanted to fill that role. Did it matter?

Finch was nice, fun. He was the only one with me on my birthday, and he wasn't hurting in the handsome department, clearly. If August didn't want me, why not have fun with his twin?

*Because August might find out and be upset, my unhelpful conscience whispered.*

If August had really pined for me in high school, the way he'd sort of admitted, he'd have confided in Finch back then, when they'd been close. He might be pissed if Finch and I hooked up. But August had a girlfriend *with a promise ring*. A life that didn't involve me.

My decisions weren't his concern.

Tired of my lame wallowing, I grinned at Finch, returning his flirtations. I turned my brain to silent as we walked to my apartment. I moved on autopilot as I fitted my key into the door and dragged Finch inside. I closed my eyes when our shirts hit the floor, his bare chest pressed to mine.

His lips searched for purchase. "So long," he murmured. "I've wanted you so long."

My belly cramped at those needy words. Passionate words. Words I longed to whisper to August. *I've wanted you so long*. He wasn't here, though, and I was lonely. So, so lonely. Finch was undressing me, showering me with kisses. I tried pretending it was another man's mouth on my skin. *August. My August*. If I couldn't have the man I wanted on my birthday, I would steal a moment of abandon from his twin. Pretend. Dream. Live the lie.

It was a wasted effort.

The sex was mechanical, motions gone through, our bodies fitting together, my mind somewhere else. My faked orgasm sped the whole affair along. Finch, however, whispered endearments, hips relentless in pursuit of his pleasure. I was glad when it was over. And sad. Guilt returned as Finch kissed me gently and went to deal with the condom.

Did he have a thing for me? Had he been crushing on me the whole time I'd been crushing on his brother? Did August know? It was likely why Finch had been so attentive this year, and here I was, only wanting a mindless night. God, what a mess.

Letting him down after this would be another painful blow.

A knock at the door cut through my worry, and I groaned. Last thing I wanted was a witness to this sham, but Clean Your Damn Area Claire must have forgotten her key again. That emo girl would lose her black fingernails if they weren't attached.

Tossing on an oversized tee, I stood and breathed through the fog of bad decisions this night had become. I couldn't even blame the Jäger.

Unable to swallow past the lump in my throat, I hurried to the door and yanked it open.

I nearly passed out.

August Cruz was in my doorway, at my apartment, a crazed look in his stunning hazel eyes. "Happy birthday," he said, a slight pant to his words, as though he'd run here.

Then he kissed me. Callused fingers gripping my jaw, he crushed his lips to mine, devouring me like I was air in an airless world. This wasn't mechanical. This wasn't pretend. This was the love of my life twirling his tongue around mine sensually, moving his lips and body the same way he played guitar: with animal abandon.

It was too good. He was too good. And I let it all go on too long. I somehow managed to push him away. "You gave her a promise ring," was the first thing I said.

Not, *I slept with your brother*. Not, *your brother is in the next room*.

My brain cells had vacated the building.

He winced. "You saw that post?" Before I could answer, he breathed harder, talking over himself. "I'd bought that ring for *your* birthday, and she assumed it was for her."

He tugged at the back of his dark hair. "It's just, I've been thinking about you nonstop lately. Not sure why now—maybe it was your birthday coming up or the school year ending—but I knew I needed to set things right with you. I'd decided to end things with Kayla tonight. I got your address from your mother and planned to face you, then you sent me that text. And it was like...the whole thing kind of floored me."

Creases sank into his furrowed brow. “I’m sorry I lashed out at first. I wasn’t expecting for all that shit to resurface. But I think it’s good, you know? That we cleared the air. Now we can finally do this, be together. Because this thing with us?” He prowled closer and lifted the ring in question. “It’s always been you, Gwen. No one holds a candle to you.”

That’s when Finch walked into the living area, nothing on but his boxers.

That’s when I realized the extent of my Worst Terrible Fuck-up.



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PRESENT DAY, 12:00 P.M.



AUGUST

I couldn't remember names to save my life. I sucked at *Jeopardy* and Trivial Pursuit, and every video game ever created, but I could play guitar in my sleep, and if there was an Olympic procrastination event, I'd take gold.

Gear slung over my shoulder, I joined the melee of sweaty men gathered around the soccer field. Being a full-time musician—touring, writing, recording—left me little time for my old obsession, but I missed soccer. The quick footwork. Working with a team. Plus finding a pick-up game meant I could put off the real reason I'd returned to San Francisco.

Handshakes were passed around for a game well played. Others, like me, readied to hit the field next. The grins and laughs brought me back to my high school days playing in the California Regional League. It also forced a montage of a giggling Gwen front and center.

*Her shoving grass down my shirt as I dribbled around her.*

*Me tickling her while she tried to steal the ball.*

I ground my teeth, something I'd been doing too much of since returning here. Since avoiding Gwen, specifically. Considering she was the reason I'd flown home, I needed to get over myself, or I'd end up with a hefty dental bill.

I tossed my gym bag next to the clothes piled near the field. A game was what I needed. Sixty minutes to focus on

nothing but marking an attacker, stripping the ball from him, and executing clean passes. Sixty minutes to forget why I'd cut my European tour short, and to pretend tomorrow's April 12<sup>th</sup> date didn't still affect me.

My molars worked harder, as though chewing that memory into sludge. I even spat out a wad of saliva, but my tongue still tasted bitter—bitterness laced with guilt, the latter emotion new when it came to Gwen. But when she learned what I'd done, she'd have more right to punch me than the retaliation I'd unleashed on Finch nine years ago. Not that I regretted the sting of my fist connecting with his nose.

Jaw locked, I yanked my cleats from my bag. I nearly snapped the laces tying them up. *I'll call her after the game, I told myself. Meet her face-to-face and say what I came to say, then get out of town.*

Unless this was like the April my second album had been due to the record label. That procrastination-athon had involved walking the Paris streets and a ridiculously clean apartment, forcing me to mainline coffee as I busted out the album in five endless days.

If I didn't get my head together, I'd have to ransack my hotel room like a bona-fide rock star, then spend my avoidance time tidying up.

Tired of my looping frustrations, I swept aside thoughts of Gwen and tried to enjoy the sun on my back. It was a welcome change to Germany's recent drizzly spell. The fresh air beat the smoke-filled clubs I'd played the past year, the stage spotlight nowhere near as nice as the California sun.

Sunshine. Soccer. No insane tour schedule. Maybe being home wasn't so bad.

“August, man...where'd *you* come from?”

I spun around and smiled in earnest. “Owen. Shit. How long's it been?”

The big guy shook his head, looking equally as surprised to see me. “Too long. Way too long. Last I heard, you and your guitar were winning over Europe.”

I ran my left thumb over my callused fingers. “Not sure about the winning part, but it pays the bills.”

“Modesty doesn’t suit you. I’ve seen YouTube videos. There were screaming girls.”

I shrugged off the comment, never comfortable with praise. I may not have hit it big in the U.S., but my European audience had grown steadily, my singer-songwriter style hitting the mark with them. Downloads had recently shot through the roof, my fan base building, tours getting longer. And lonelier. Not that I could complain. Most musicians would trade their spleens to make a living doing what they loved.

“What about you?” I asked, happy to deflect. Last thing I needed was him asking why I was in town. “Thought you were living in D.C.”

I glanced at the tattooed guy beside him and offered a nod.

Owen dragged a hand through his sandy hair, mopping up sweat along the way. “I was, but it seems like a lifetime ago. Been living here over a year now. Traded in my finance job for a woodworking business.”

“Dude, are you trying to be an asshole?” The tattooed guy drew my attention, his grin a contrast to his snarky comment.

I took in his rough exterior, catching a glimpse of familiarity under his dark scruff and shaggy hair. I squinted and leaned closer and...no fucking way. “Jimmy?”

He motioned to his yellow jersey. “Is the color throwing you off?”

I snorted. It may have been twelve years, and we may have worn red when the three of us had played soccer together, but the change in jersey wasn’t what had thrown me off. Teenage Jimmy had been a clean-cut pretty boy, not a tatted up, scruffy man. “You did something different with your hair, I think.”

He barked out a laugh. “Nailed it. My girlfriend likes applying conditioning treatments.”

We shook hands and pounded backs while I digested this biker version of Jimmy Giannopoulos. It wouldn't have been such a shock if I'd kept in touch with the guys, but who had the time? Owen and Jimmy were a couple years older than me, had gone to different high schools, but we'd played in the regional league together. We'd been close. Staying connected into adulthood was still tough.

The only social media I suffered through was to promote my music, never wasting hours scrolling through Facebook or Snapchat or Twitter. The meager news I'd hear about old friends came through accidental run-ins, the odd person attending my shows.

Owen massaged his shoulder. "If you're in town awhile, we should go for a beer."

This visit would be as short as possible, unless I decided to learn how to knit or speak Japanese before facing Gwen. "I'd love to catch up, but I have some things to take care of, then it's back on the road."

At least I sounded confident about getting shit done.

Arriving here around the anniversary of Gwen's epic betrayal wasn't helping matters. The event may have been part of the reason I'd quit school and had become a musician, something I could thank her and Finch for, but the betrayal had festered a long time. I'd managed to block Gwen from my life the past nine years, but missing her mother's recent funeral had felt wrong. I'd also found myself remembering our good times lately, more than rehashing that one awful night. Barely being civil with my brother was a whole other wreck, everything easier to ignore when across the globe.

The sooner I saw Gwen, the sooner I could put her—and all of it—behind me.

Instead I was winning my procrastination-athon.

"If you change your mind," Owen said, "let me know. This guy"—he elbowed Jimmy—"lives in Napa now, but he's around plenty. We can coordinate soccer next time. Sign up for the same pick-up game."

“You running the winery now?” I asked Jimmy.

He nodded. “My brother and I took it over. We’re doing some rebranding, and I’m organizing Napa festivals on the side. Actually...” He bobbed his head as though having an internal conversation. “Any chance you’d play at a function? It would be great exposure for the festivals.”

Committing to anything in San Francisco made me itch, but I offered a vague, “Sure, we’ll work on it.”

We all traded numbers as Owen’s brother, Emmett, joined us with his boyfriend—a pompadour-styled guy with more ink than Jimmy. A few short minutes of reminiscing settled me, but it was a reminder my life now was full of transient people, acquaintances. Not friends who remembered how I drank myself sick on tequila and had puked on Samantha Walsh. No one in Europe had a clue I’d streaked through Delores Park. These guys did. Built-in history. Easy banter.

Owen smiled at someone over my shoulder, then headed toward his gear. I turned to check out the recipient of that affectionate look, and my internal organs slammed on their brakes.

*Gwen.*

The two girls beside her were watching the guys leave, but Gwen’s eyes were locked on me, and my pulse rocketed, like I’d already played my soccer game, had run a marathon, had summited Everest, my oxygen thinning at a rapid rate. I wanted to drop to my knees and apologize for what I’d done. I also wanted to tell her *her* actions had devastated *me*, but if she’d listened to my first angst-ridden album, she’d be well acquainted with my resentment.

That didn’t keep me from soaking her in.

Even from my distance, I could tell her arms were defined in her slim tank top, suggesting she worked out a lot. She’d always been athletic, but this was a body honed through years of exercise, work. Her hair skimmed her shoulders, shorter than I’d ever seen it, her face a bit more angular. She still

exuded casual style. Effortless. Unpretentious. Drop-dead beautiful.

Swallowing became an effort.

As did hiding the desire one look from her inspired. It echoed through me, the vibrations like reverb blasting from my guitar. It wasn't cool. I replayed how catching my brother in his boxers had sickened me, that smug grin on his face. How often I'd pictured him and Gwen in bed together, unable to stop. My lips compressed and my nostrils flared.

That was better. That was how I was supposed to feel.

Angry. Resentful.

Gwen sat on the bleachers, gaze locked on me, piles of unaired dirty laundry between us. If I had to write a song for the haunted anguish in her eyes, I'd title it: "Shame's Window."



## GWEN

My two best friends were trying to talk to me—Ainsley snapping her fingers in front of my face and checking for vitals, while Rachel asked what was wrong. I couldn't focus on anything but the man talking to Owen and Jimmy.

And I did mean *man*.

August hadn't noticed me yet, thank God, the small mercy allowing me to study him. Unlike the boy I'd grown up with, this August had shoulders a swimmer would covet and a jaw that could cut diamonds. The cords on his neck stood out. His thighs and calves belonged on a Greek statue. Glasses no longer shielded his hazel eyes, but I wasn't close enough to test if the gold flecks in those stunners still reduced me to a sippy mess.

That didn't keep my body temperature from spiking to lava levels. Even more alarming was that he seemed to know Owen

and Jimmy, the three men slapping backs and talking like old friends.

Considering Rachel and Ainsley were the better halves of those two hunks, this could be world-ending bad.

Rachel leaned forward and stared at my catatonic face. “Do we need to call a doctor?”

“It’s him,” was all I managed.

Ainsley, the always stylish fashionista, crossed her legs and smoothed her floral dress. “Him who?”

“August,” I said.

The sound of my friends sucking in shocked breaths should have been amusing, but amusement was no longer in my emotion arsenal. They knew August had been my first love, but the details of why we’d never hooked up had remained in my high-security vault. A *Mission Impossible*, booby-trapped vault.

I should come clean and finally confess what I’d done, explain how I’d lost August for good, ruining his relationship with his brother in the process, but the words blockaded my throat.

The girls were the closest thing I had to family, to sisters. They knew how estranged I’d been from my mother before cancer took her last month. They’d listened to me speculate endlessly about who my father might be, while cursing my mother for keeping the information secret. They were the most important people in my life. The idea of them learning my Worst Terrible Fuck-up gutted me.

Ainsley ogled the love of my life. “Was he that hot when you knew him?”

“He’s filled out,” I murmured.

August’s back was to me now—a well-built, muscular back—but he glanced over his shoulder as though sensing me. His eyes widened in recognition, and that lava in my veins steamed and bubbled. When a shadow eclipsed his features and his body stiffened, that molten liquid hardened into ice.

“I need to go.” Barely glancing at the girls, I rushed away from the soccer field, worried I’d puke on the grass or start bawling. I never cried. Ever. Not even at my mother’s funeral. And I hadn’t thrown up since my first CrossFit workout and the one hundred pull-ups that had bested me.

Yet, here I was, ready to puke or bawl.

Nine years should be long enough to get over my Worst Terrible Fuck-up (aka my WTF night, an appropriate acronym), but some guilt-ridden disasters were eternal.

Hence my nausea. And my stinging eyes.

I should have contacted August after what I’d done, offered some sort of explanation. I’d dialed his number so often the digits had practically been imprinted on my fingers. I’d even practiced what I’d say, every night, every morning, repeating my apology on a loop: *I slept with your brother because I loved you and the idea of never having you had destroyed me.* But shame had kept the words inside. Disgust with myself. Then too much time had passed.

Nine years, to be precise.

Nine years of remorseful silence.

Now he was in town.

August was supposed to be on tour, *not* that I’d memorized his tour schedule. I didn’t know every word to every one of his songs, either. I didn’t own two T-shirts with his face plastered on them or have a poster of him pasted inside my closet door like a lovesick teenager. Nope.

I barely knew August Cruz existed.

Chewing my cheek raw, I drove to my mother’s as I’d planned. Seeing August wouldn’t derail my day, my week, my life. Definitely not. Nothing had changed, including how I’d torn out his heart. If the songs on his first album were any indication, he probably owned a Gwen voodoo doll he disemboweled daily. The titles sure were cheery:

“The Destroyer.”

“Love is Hate.”

“Dressed in Lies.”

“I Don’t Need You.”

“Torching History.”

My personal favorite: “Girl with the Black Heart.”

Those stabby lyrics had punctured my heart on repeat. They affected me to this day. God, I was pathetic, unable to let that idiotic night go.

I parked and marched toward my mother’s home, but couldn’t keep from glancing at the neighbor’s bungalow. That particular habit was as grating as my workout playlist filled with August’s songs. His family no longer lived there, but I always paused next to the lemon-yellow house. The current owners didn’t tend their lawn, dandelions ruling most of the grass. August wasn’t there to tame it. To tame me. To sneak into my room and sing me to sleep.

If I didn’t stop obsessing, I’d have to lobotomize myself.

I forced myself inside and exhaled. Silence. Blessed, blessed, silence. It enveloped me, calmed the uglies nicking at my dark places. A normal woman would be bereft in here, sad to see the quilt draped over the reclining chair that hadn’t reclined in months, the unused cherry dining table, the lack of pictures on the taupe walls. But my tear ducts were as empty as the vacant bungalow.

And empty was A-okay.

I mentally stuffed thoughts of August into a dynamite stick, blew it to smithereens, then stomped up my mother’s stairs.

Boxes lined the hallway, most rooms bare but for the larger items to be appraised. All was neatly sorted, tagged, stacked. Forty-five years of Mary Hamilton eating Raisin Bran, working as a receptionist, watching *Murder She Wrote* reruns, while either ignoring me or criticizing my clothes or grades or music, all tucked inside brown cardboard.

Life reduced to bundled boxes.

It was a reminder living was more important than collecting. The organization of it had fed my recent restlessness.

Her bedroom was a different story.

Where the office, bathroom, and guest room were stripped bare and catalogued, these beige walls barely contained a tsunami of disorder. I'd upturned every dresser drawer, had flipped her mattress. I'd searched her books for hidden compartments, had even cut away sections of her taupe rug, sure she'd hidden some piece of her past before she'd died.

A memento. A diary. Any clue to who my father was.

No such luck.

*But* if I lost my adoption agency gig, I could photograph the wreckage and place a Craigslist ad: Goon for Hire.

My exhaustive search had been fruitless. I'd all but given up. Today was supposed to be about stemming this damage, packing it away, cleaning up. But I'd promised myself I'd find my father this year. Before my birthday.

Before tomorrow.

I stared blankly ahead until a vague pounding registered. The sound grew in decibel and frequency. I was so zoned out, it took a stupid amount of time to realize someone was at my front door. I dodged the upstairs boxes, side-to-side, like I was racing through an obstacle course, hurried down the stairs, and yanked open the door.

"There's something going on with you, and I'm not leaving until you tell me what." Rachel, with her freckled skin, big brown eyes, and J.Crew ensemble, attempted severity by crossing her arms. Bambi would have better luck moonlighting as Godzilla.

I matched her wide stance. "Look at you, being all bossy."

"I'm going for no-nonsense."

"Try harder next time."

Her attention dragged to the house next door. She studied it as though it might instantaneously combust. Exactly how I felt. I wasn't sure if Rachel's bad cop routine was hurting or helping. "Come on in, Sherlock."

She followed me into the living room and surveyed the organized mess. "Wow. Looks like you're almost done."

"Just my mother's room left." Which I wasn't about to show her. "I'd offer you a seat, but it might get dicey." We eyed the boxes barricading the couch and dining chairs.

She dropped her purse, plopped herself on the hardwood floor, and patted the space in front of her. "This will do fine."

I remained standing. "What if I'm not ready to open the vault?"

She straightened her posture. "Then I'll chain myself to the sofa and stage a sit-in until you crack."

"You'll miss Jimmy."

"He'll visit."

"I won't provide wine."

"I'm due for a detox."

I glared at her, and she smiled back. The woman was battle ready.

Normally I hated to lose, even in a battle of wills. With no siblings growing up, a "no electronics in your room" rule, an early curfew, and a mother who had vacillated between depressed and antagonistic, I'd kept busy by competing against myself.

I'd play solitaire on my bedroom floor, over and over, refusing to sleep until I'd win a round. When August would smoke me in backgammon, I'd throw a temper tantrum and force him into another game. I'd run sprints at ungodly morning hours, determined to make my high school track team and win our meets. Blisters had been my badge of honor.

These days I was relentless in CrossFit, bettering my endurance, my strength, my speed, all to beat myself.

I could shore up my defenses now, win this battle of stubbornness against Rachel, and keep the details of my WTF in my secured vault, but the shock of seeing August this morning had weakened my stronghold. Maybe caving to Rachel would help me rebuild it.

“Thing is,” I said, settling in cross-legged, facing her, “I kind of fucked up in college.”

She gathered my hands in hers. “Tell Auntie Rachel everything.”

Her already large eyes widened as I admitted my shame: pushing August away our last year of high school, the birthday texts, telling him I’d been jealous of him and his girlfriend, the “promise ring” misunderstanding, sleeping with his brother. Him walking in afterward.

“You should have seen his face,” I went on, my voice thinning under the weight of that awful memory. “He looked at me like I’d murdered his family. I mean, disgust doesn’t even begin to cover it. Then August and Finch got into it, shoving and yelling. Saying crazy stuff about me, like August and Finch had had an agreement about me or something. I don’t know. It all happened so fast and I was in shock. But the part where August broke Finch’s nose with a right hook and told me I was dead to him is crystal clear.”

The confession tasted as sour as it sounded, and that burning returned to my eyes. I bit my tongue to steady my emotions.

Rachel didn’t release my trembling hands. She squeezed them tighter. “Did you talk with him after that night? Apologize and explain things?”

I shook my head. More shame swamped me.

“No wonder you’re upset. First your mother, then seeing him—any rational person would run for cover.”

“This has nothing to do with my mother,” I said quickly. “I told you, I’m not sad about her.” This worsening emptiness couldn’t be because of Mary Hamilton. You couldn’t mourn someone you didn’t love, or even like.

Rachel pursed her lips as though she didn't believe me. An understandable reaction. When she'd lost her father years back, the tragedy had gutted her. It still did. But he had never treated her like she was a mosquito he couldn't shake. An irritation. A problem to squash.

My mother couldn't glance at me without curling her lip. She'd refused to tell me who my father was. She'd hated the man, that much had been clear, and I'd obviously been a reminder of him. She'd been estranged from her parents, too, robbing me of grandparents—although those two subscribed to a special brand of wacky. She hadn't even spoken to her sister in over a decade. Mary Hamilton wasn't built to foster relationships.

No. I hadn't mourned my mother's passing. Right or wrong, good or bad, relief had come with that eventuality. Except it meant I'd never discover my father's identity.

I'd also lose the challenge I'd set for myself last year.

Three hundred and sixty-four days ago, I'd sat in a bar with Ainsley and Rachel, and the three of us had agreed to make life-altering wishes. Resolutions to change our lives by our next shared birthday.

Meeting the girls the night we'd all turned twenty-one had been my saving grace, the three of us coincidentally wasted in the same bar seven years ago. After my WTF, April 12th had become a black hole of a day. Since meeting the girls, it had turned from an approaching death sentence to a celebration.

Every year we drank and laughed and had fun, but last year had been more meaningful, the wish to learn my father's identity a huge one for me. I was sure I'd make it happen.

Then my mother died.

"No," I said again, more vehemently, "I'm not sad she's gone. I'm pissed at her for screwing me up, but not sad."

"You're not screwed up. You're the strongest person I know." She released my hands and squeezed my bicep teasingly. "And the craziest, but in a good way."

"Jumping out of airplanes isn't crazy."

“It’s certifiable. As is rock climbing without a rope. And bungee jumping. And surfing insane waves.”

She had a point. But after my WTF night and hitting the Grand Canyon of rock bottoms, I’d vowed to stop living my life afraid. *Scare myself. Make life my bitch.* Those had become my mottos. Aside from being stupid good fun, adrenaline was the only outlet that drowned the unpleasant voices in my head. Which meant I should have marched over to August Cruz earlier and apologized. That would have shot my heart rate through the roof.

If I’d finally confessed the extent of my feelings toward him nine years ago, my heart would probably have burst through my chest.

Texting back then that I’d been jealous of Kayla hadn’t been the same as saying *I loved you so much in high school it hurt to breathe.* I wasn’t about to lay that crushing truth at his feet now, not when one look at him stirred those dormant feelings to life. He did, however, deserve a grovel fest complete with bended knee.

Yet I’d run away.

I picked at my stubby nails. “Maybe I should drive back. Drag August out of the game and beg his forgiveness.”

“Might be awkward timing,” she said drily.

“Is there good timing for this sort of thing?”

“I’d go for something less public.”

I dropped my head forward. After dealing with my mother’s illness and death, I figured I was due for some good karma. I’d considered dating again, hoped my luck would turn around and I’d meet a non-asshole. Instead, August Cruz had been thrust back into my life. The opposite of an asshole, but he’d never see me as anything but a traitor.

This wasn’t how I’d expected my twenty-seventh year to end. Not by a landslide. Especially after how it had started. “Ainsley told me you guys fulfilled your birthday wishes this year,” I said. “Which I’m thrilled about—you both seem so happy. But I was stupid enough to wish for the impossible.”

“To meet your dad?” Compassion filled her voice.

I nodded, touched she knew me well enough to figure it out. We’d written our wishes down last year, hadn’t shared them aloud. We’d needed accountability, assurance we’d work toward our goals. Then I’d tucked the folded papers in my purse to be opened at our next birthday, which was tomorrow.

“Not fulfilling mine’s been eating at me,” I said. “Worse with tomorrow’s deadline—which I know is silly. There’s no timeline on something like this. But I thought setting the date would make it happen, that I’d at least learn my father’s name. So I think that’s messing with my mind, and seeing August didn’t help. He used to help with reconnaissance work, childish investigative stuff with the two of us sleuthing to find my dad. It all just kinda sucks.”

She tucked my hair behind my ear. “It sucks big fat donkey cock.”

I snorted at her uncharacteristic dirty humor. “Way to channel your inner Ainsley.” A girl who got her rocks off embarrassing others with inappropriate jokes.

“Anything to make you smile.” A job well done. Her tone sobered. “I’m glad you told me what happened with August. I get it if you want some alone time to wallow, but Jimmy and I are meeting Ainsley and Owen for early drinks tonight, before we head to different events we have. A little ‘day before birthday’ celebration. You should—”

Knocking cut her off, another intruder. So much for my blessed silence.

Groaning, I pushed to my feet and headed for the door. If someone was selling Girl Scout Cookies, I’d buy the whole lot and drown my stress in cookie goodness. But it wasn’t a Girl Scout. It was a sweaty August.



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1:00 P.M.



## AUGUST

I swallowed past the history gumming up my throat and offered a tentative smile. “Hey.”

Fucking *hey*. Three letters. One syllable. Not exactly eloquent for a guy who poured his heart into verse. Nine years of deafening silence will do that to a man, a lifetime of my favorite memories torched by one disastrous night.

And all I had was *hey*.

Gwen’s jaw unhinged, not a sound coming out. Mine almost dropped, too. It had been one thing watching her from afar on the field, but this? Her body was as strong and toned as I’d thought, lean muscles defining her arms. Her tank top accentuated her tight stomach, the curves of her breasts. I’d almost had my hands on those soft swells, my mouth, my tongue, my *teeth*.

Too bad she screwed my brother.

Except that fiasco wasn’t why I’d bailed on my soccer game partway through, why I was standing on her mother’s doorstep now, in workout shorts and a soccer jersey, sweat cooling into clammy patches on my skin.

What happened nine years ago was history. Painful history, but history nonetheless.

Curling my hands into fists, I wrenched my eyes from her body and focused on her face. Her hypnotizing eyes scattered

my thoughts. “I’m sorry about your mother.”

She blinked, as though rousing from a dream. “My mother?”

“I should have called. Come in for the funeral.”

Before she could reply, the brunette from the bleachers poked her head through the door and offered her hand. “I’m Rachel, Gwen’s friend. I think you know my boyfriend Jimmy.”

Gwen had friends I no longer knew. She probably had a boyfriend, too. A life beyond the neighborhood we grew up in and years we’d shared. A sudden cramp seized my gut. Probably a stitch, after-effects of splitting on my soccer game without stretching, coupled with all things Gwen. The faster I got this over with, the faster I could breathe easier.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t stop staring at Gwen’s pink lips, how the lower one was slightly fuller, with that damn freckle on the left.

I shook Rachel’s hand. “I’m August. Jimmy and I played soccer together as teens. It was nice catching up.”

“Well...” Rachel glanced between Gwen’s still-gaping mouth and my divided focus. “I need to get going, but—”

“No, you don’t.” Gwen clutched Rachel’s elbow.

“Yes, I do.”

“But we have that thing.”

Rachel patted Gwen’s shoulder. “Later. Our thing is later. Meet us for drinks.” She kissed Gwen’s cheek and nodded to me as she slipped past, leaving us to stew in our tension.

Gwen wrapped her arms around her middle.

I shifted on my feet, wishing I wasn’t in sneakers and shorts. Nowhere to shove my restless hands. Hands that wanted to erase the deep furrow sinking between Gwen’s green eyes. It had always been like this with Gwen, my need to comfort her an embedded impulse. I also wanted to rail at her, our history bubbling below my skin. “Sorry if I smell,” I

said, tamping both reflexes and grasping for conversation. “I was playing soccer.”

She cleared her throat. “Considering I saw you there, and you’re sweating on the front step now, I put two and two together.”

“I see your sarcasm is alive and well.” The edge to my tone was also a living, breathing thing. A sharp rasp in my throat.

The crease in her brow deepened. “Sorry. This is awkward.”

To say the least. I could have done this over the phone, called her a week ago, before my procrastination-athon had begun, but this wasn’t the type of news you dumped on someone from afar, no matter our strained past.

She peered at me intently. “Did you swap your glasses for contacts?”

“I had laser eye surgery.”

“Oh.” She looked at her toes, at my knees, at the yard beyond me. “The lawn isn’t as nice as when you lived there.”

I followed her line of sight to my childhood home. I could practically see a path between our front yards, a trail forged by memories of a giggling Gwen and water fights and nights lying in the grass, her head on my lap, my hands itching to stroke her hair. The vivid flashbacks fisted my heart and squeezed.

“The house looks smaller,” I said. Not *I miss you*. Not *why did you ruin us?* Not *I did something you’ll never forgive*.

She kept her eyes on the house. “You’re just bigger.”

“Did the gutters always slant like that?” This I could do. Talk about nothing instead of our past and the reason I was here.

“Doubt it.”

“It needs an overhaul.”

“The paint job certainly needs love.”

The word *love* drifting from her lips had me rubbing the stitch still twisting my side.

I'd thought we were destined for each other, Gwen and me. The type of soul mates who'd gone through hardships, but could never stay apart. Her nineteenth birthday was supposed to have been the start of our time. Our new beginning. It had been the exact opposite, and I needed to remember that. Not give life to the overpowering connection tugging at me while we talked about laser eye surgery and the deterioration of childhood homes.

Her focus finally settled on me. "How'd you know I was here and not at my apartment?"

"Shot in the dark." Wasn't sure yet if it was lucky or unlucky, not with these confusing feelings jumbling my insides.

She didn't invite me in, or apologize for what she'd done all those years ago, but the jade in her eyes shimmered, a hint of pooling tears. Gwen didn't do tears. She was tough, made of self-determination and independence. Built by an indifferent mother and lack of affection. But the vulnerability behind her rigid posture was palpable...as was something else.

Her face softened, wistfulness in the lift of her brow, mixed with desire? Yearning?

If the emotion pouring from her eyes were a song, it would be titled "First Love."

It rocked me. All our history, and it only took one look, one mundane conversation, and I was imagining my lips on Gwen's, her in my arms, our painful past erased. Exactly why I hadn't contacted her after receiving her mother's insane letter. Why I'd missed the funeral. Why I'd delayed coming here: I'd never gotten over Gwen Hamilton.

That awareness didn't erase the sting of betrayal simmering in my gut. Both slogged together, stirring into a queasy concoction.

When it came to Gwen, I couldn't see straight.

“Can we talk?” I nodded toward the house. I needed to move, break this spell. Apologize for what I’d done, then get away.

Arms still hugging her belly, she stepped back. I walked past her and our arms brushed. Just a whisper of skin against skin, but enough to spark each of my follicles. *The Zap*, I used to call it—a stupid, infatuated teen who’d go gaga, one graze from her zinging all my nerves to life. *Fire. Thirst. Hunger.*

Some things never changed.

I focused on her and Finch instead. Gwen the Deceiver. Gwen the Traitor.

That Gwen was familiar. That Gwen I could talk to without wondering if she felt this indelible connection, too. But the boxes filling the too-familiar space shot me with an injection of guilt. She probably did this alone, packing her mother’s life away. Unless her friends had helped her, or a man. Likely a man. My cramp knotted tighter, turning my sloshy insides into a trash compacter.

I readied to tell her about the blasted letter and get away from her and this uncomfortable ache, but she swiveled, and said, “I’m sorry about that night.”

Dammit. Not what I could handle right now. “It’s ancient history.”

If I said it, maybe my heart would believe it.

“It’s not. Not for me, at least. I was too embarrassed to contact you after. It’s the worst thing I’ve ever done, my biggest mistake. I don’t even want to explain it, because it makes no sense. Absolutely none. And I won’t make excuses, but I want you to know how sorry I am.”

She didn’t want to explain it? Not even try? “Why don’t you give it a shot, Gwen? Give me the abridged version. The bullet points of why you fucked Finch.”

She swallowed convulsively, and I tensed down to my toes, barely refraining from punching the wall. This was *not* why I’d flown home. This wasn’t about me and my bruised ego.

Why the hell couldn't I just let it go?

She sucked on her bottom lip, a move that had more fire driving through my veins. Different fire. I couldn't keep from glancing at her slim hips, her long legs, how the bottoms of her camouflage pants skimmed her calves, the material tough but sexy. Like Gwen. Nine years of nurtured anger threaded with remorse over what I'd done, and tangled with this *thing*. This gripping attraction and wistfulness—a deep missing of this woman from my life—leaving me lightheaded.

I was such a mess around her. “Forget I asked that. I don't want to know. The reason—”

“Because I was lonely, August. That's the abridged version. The ugly truth.”

“Jesus, Gwen.” There was no couch to fall onto, unless I wanted to scale boxes. Nowhere to brace myself for the conversation we'd avoided for nine years.

“I know. I'm an idiot. But I saw that stupid Facebook post, the ring on Kayla's hand, and I freaked out. I'd just admitted I'd had feelings for you—all those years and I finally found the courage to tell you. I couldn't face you after that.”

“So you sought out Finch? To hurt me?”

“No, God, never.” She reached for me, but curled her hands into fists. “I was hurting back then. Like really hurting—sad and lonely, about you and my mother. I had no one close in my life, and I chose the wrong way to self-medicate. It's a childish excuse, but it's all I've got. Everything I did that night was wrong.”

Understatement, but I'd thought I'd dealt with it. Yet here I was, the wounds feeling fresh once more. “All you had to do was wait. I was ready to forgive you for cutting me from your life *for a year and a half*. Why couldn't you have waited one fucking night for me?”

“I don't know. I was a stupid kid with no real family and few friends, and enough self-loathing to keep half the therapists in the country employed. I didn't think you'd ever feel what I felt. And you and Finch looked so much alike. I

wanted to pretend, even for a moment, that you were mine, which is really warped. It just got so twisted.”

Beyond twisted, and my head spun.

For nine years I'd believed her texts that night had been lies. She'd ghosted on me our last year in high school. Had ignored me until her birthday messages. Then she'd slept with my brother, as though she'd gone out of her way to toy with me. I'd assumed her actions had been a form of retaliation—a way to punish me for who the hell knew what? For having loving parents? A scholarship? More friends?

“Not sure what to do with that,” I said, my voice scratched up. I wasn't sure what to do with any of this.

Her chin wobbled. “I don't expect your forgiveness. I know there's no chance for us. It's done. I just wanted to apologize. I should have said it back then.”

*No chance for us.* Her words were threaded with such loss, like she'd toss a penny into a pond and wish for it to be otherwise. Like she'd take me now if I offered myself up. The regret pooling in her glistening gaze was enough to fill the Pacific.

All I'd ever done was try to make Gwen happy. I'd taught her guitar, to touch her and sit close, but a creative outlet was valuable, something to distract her from her cold house when I wasn't around. I would invite her to my family dinners. We'd sneak into each other's rooms, to play cards and backgammon and argue if Superman or Wolverine would win in a flat-out brawl. We had spent endless hours together, searching for clues to find her father.

Then she tossed me and our history away like it had been nothing.

Not an easy pill to swallow, but I'd coped by believing everything had happened for a reason. Walking in on Gwen and Finch had led to more hours writing music, less studying. Deferring my courses. Traveling. Putting everything into song. Without that devastating blow, I could be living in San

Francisco, working some nine-to-five, ass sore from warming an office chair, singing karaoke instead of originals.

But if fate had guided my folly in showing up at Gwen's that night, then why had it brought me here now, after what I'd done? Why was I feeling this intense longing when the information I came to share would shatter her?

She was shaking slightly, gnawing on her lip like it was her job. I jammed my hand through my hair. All this time, all this pain, and she'd slept with my brother because she'd been irrevocably lonely. Not to hurt me or push me away. She'd done it to cope with her abandonment issues.

It still stung...but less. I was also tired of holding a grudge.

"Apology accepted," I said, ready to leave our past in the past. "The history isn't as ancient as I let on, and it would do me good to put it to bed." But the comment had me picturing Gwen in a bed, *in the present*, those strong thighs around my waist, my cock buried inside her. Lust tapped a beat up my spine.

Tainted history and all, my attraction to her hadn't lessened, and delaying my reason for being here only made it worse.

She stepped closer. "Do you mean it?"

"Mean what?"

"You can move on from what I did? Forgive me?"

I didn't recognize the hesitancy in her voice. Teenage Gwen hadn't had a tentative bone in her body. "It's been nine years. I'm not holed up in my apartment, wallowing in self-pity."

She tilted her chin down—eyes wide, head cocked—giving me her *don't bullshit me* expression. *This* Gwen, I knew. "“Girl with the Black Heart”?" she said.

Busted. Writing an album full of hate songs had been excellent therapy. The fact she knew it also meant she'd been keeping tabs on me. "Have you been listening to my music?"

She shook her head quickly. “No. Of course not. I’m more of a metal girl. I just read the song titles somewhere.” But her nose twitched. The same tic that followed a Gwen fib.

“Liar.”

“Says you.”

The idea of her lying in bed, my music filling her room, pleased me more than it should. I shouldn’t be joking with her, either. Or were we flirting? Nothing was going according to plan. Including my bitterness that resurfaced. “You should give it a listen. It’s a how-to on dealing with a broken heart.”

She inhaled sharply. I expected her to bite back, the way her sarcasm used to match mine blow for blow. Her tone quieted instead. “Since when does mending a broken heart involve dousing a girl in gasoline?”

“Not a girl. Her shadow. It was about torching history you can’t shake. And I thought you hadn’t heard the song.”

“I maybe saw the lyrics online.”

“Which line is your favorite?”

She opened her mouth, likely to tell me off, but she flattened her lips. A twinkle backlit the wariness slitting her eyes. “It’s tough to decide between the part where you stomp on my ashes or the line where you say my soul is black.” She punctuated the gibe with a shaky grin.

There was nothing amusing about that dark song, or my state of mind when writing it, or how I wanted to tear Gwen’s clothing off now and release this tension and attraction for good. “I like the part where I watch your shadow burn.”

Her nostrils flared. “You should write Hallmark cards.”

I barked out a laugh, so loud and sudden we both startled. This acerbic bantering was unexpected. I didn’t think I was capable of banter with Gwen, brusque or otherwise. We’d excelled at mocking each other back in the day, jabs that had been more sweet-natured than this barb-laced jousting. Still, that nostalgia returned with a vengeance, reminding me of our once-easy friendship.

As though reading my mind, she pressed her hand to her breastbone. “You have no idea how much I’ve missed you.”

An ache spread through my chest. “It’s been a long nine years.”

An eternity. So much had changed, yet so much hadn’t, our past still between us, but less potent. If I’d come for a different reason, maybe we’d have a chance at friendship. *A chance to unleash my lingering angst a different way*, a wicked voice murmured. But her mother’s letter had been burning a hole in my wallet for two months, that fragile paper folded and unfolded so often it threatened to rip.

Not that I needed to read it again. I had the damn thing memorized.

*Dear August,*

*I am dying. As a dying woman, I have a request. Below is the name of Gwen’s father. She has always wanted to know who he is. I ask that you be the one to tell her, be there for her when she finds him.*

It had seemed like a simple request, but nothing with Gwen was simple. Not the way reading the letter had made me want to hop on a redeye and fly home and scoop Gwen into my arms to hold and protect her while she finally met the man she’d searched out her whole life. Not the way I’d stuffed the note in my wallet and had skipped Mary’s funeral, hoping the sudden pain of missing Gwen would disappear. The final line had made it so much worse:

*Remember what I told you on Gwen’s nineteenth birthday.*

That’s how she’d ended the letter, as though I hadn’t lived the last nine years wondering why she’d said what she had that

day. I'd called her for Gwen's address, and she'd given me more than I'd hoped to hear. An earful that had made me believe Mary Hamilton had cared for her daughter more than she'd let on.

Gwen stood before me now, one hand still on her chest. So many emotions—affection, shame, every secret and hope we'd ever shared, and something like uncorked *desire*—swirling in her green eyes. Unless I was projecting my overwhelming feelings onto her.

Ignoring the cocktail of emotions shaking me up, I dredged up my fortitude and prepared to admit what I'd done.

But someone knocked on the door.



---

1:30 P.M.



## GWEN

When had my mother's house turned into Grand Central Station? The knocking persisted, but I didn't budge. August looked a second from combusting, as though an internal war waged behind his sharp expression, and the intensity in his eyes sucked me in. Twin hazel tractor beams.

I'd never thought I'd see tenderness on his face again, but it had been there. A semblance of it, at least. There'd been anger, too, at first. That man had every right to spit in my eye and launch a flaming shit-bomb at my door. But the hint of longing under his tight features, the way his gaze had dipped down my body, skimming my curves, had been wholly unexpected.

And likely nonexistent.

I for sure imagined the heat in his perusal, the way I'd imagined every love song he'd ever written had been about me. Because I was certifiable. Crazy for August Cruz, always had been, always would be. Lovesick until the day I die.

A breather was in order. Space to remind myself this man had actually written hate songs about me. "Don't go anywhere," I said, terrified he and his tractor-beam eyes would disappear from my life again.

He offered a stiff nod.

I had no clue why he'd come, but I didn't care. August was in my childhood home, joking with me, offering me forgiveness. I hadn't felt this giddy since I'd forced Rachel and Ainsley into Playworld's bumper cars. (I'd cracked up while ramming them. Margaritas had been involved.) This wasn't a giddy buzz, though, the tingling in my limbs more dizzying than cackle-inducing. Facing your worst mistake and greatest love in one fell swoop came with a bevy of side effects.

Functioning in a daze, I managed to open the front door. The Girl Scout I'd hoped for earlier still hadn't appeared. In her place was an Asian man with a clipboard in front of his face and a battered red suitcase at his feet. He peered over his notes. "Ms. Hamilton?"

I had to tilt my head back to meet his eyes. "Depends which Hamilton you're after."

He checked his notes and motioned to the suitcase. "Mary Hamilton. On behalf of Greyhound bus lines, I'm returning her lost luggage."

I raised a skeptical eyebrow at the roughed-up suitcase, one of those hard-shell types with dents and skid marks, the outside covered in band stickers. I snickered. "You must have the wrong Mary Hamilton."

But I'd have paid money to see her at a Billy Idol concert. The bold stickers splashed across the suitcase would have horrified her.

He frowned at his papers and prattled off our address and the name again, scratching at his neck until a red mark bloomed.

"Look," I said, cutting him off. "Mary Hamilton was my mother. She was a forty-five-year-old dental office receptionist who died last month, not a teenage band groupie. There must be a mistake."

Again with the neck scratching. "Sorry...I should have explained fully." He blinked as though he had a loose contact and nudged the bag forward. "This is from a batch of luggage

we recently found, that went missing in 2001. They had been locked in an unused storage facility. We're returning the lost items."

Luggage from 2001? Was this guy for real? "My mother didn't travel. I'd never even seen her pack an overnight bag. She barely—"

"Was she related to a Doris Hamilton?"

I stumbled back and braced myself against the door. "What did you say?" Doris was my grandmother. Linked by DNA, not any form of relationship, but still...I'd have fallen on my ass if it weren't for the strong presence behind me. A large body. August with his hand on my lower back.

"Doris Hamilton," the man repeated. "Her name was also listed on the luggage tag, but Mary Hamilton's was the main contact."

My mother.

Lost luggage.

Billy Idol.

2001.

Breathing became an effort. "And you're saying this was hers? From seventeen years ago?" I would have been ten or eleven back then. I'd have remembered having a band groupie for a mother.

"Mary Hamilton," he said again, slowly, loudly, as though I was hard of hearing. "From 2001."

If it weren't for August looping his arm around my waist, I'd be eating pavement right now: face first, teeth chipped, bloody nose. Balance eluded me.

"Do you need us to sign something?" August took over, showing me where to write my name, behaving like a coherent adult. He led me inside afterward, just him and me and this shocking suitcase.

He gripped my hips and turned me to face him. "This is pretty nuts."

“This isn’t nuts. This is like digging up the time capsule from your yard, only to discover the Barbie you disfigured by swapping her legs with Spider-Man’s had come to life to take over the globe.”

He smirked. “Barbie-Man was awesome.”

“Barbie-Man was a horror. Barbie-Man as an immortal bent on world domination would be catastrophic.”

He smiled fully, the creases around his mouth and eyes filling with affection. Wooziness swept through me again, and I clasped his wrists. Scents of sweat and clove and man drifted from him, an unfamiliar cologne. As a boy he’d smelled of fresh-cut grass and his mother’s fried chicken. To this day, I couldn’t pass a lawnmower or fast-food chicken joint without sighing.

He inched a fraction closer, his smile slipping into something darker. His warm breath skimmed my hair. I’d swear his grip on me tightened. “Barbie-Man was scary because you scalped her. You ruined what I was trying to create.”

Was that another dig? Him reviving how I’d ruined *us*? He had said he’d forgiven me, but laying nine years of resentment to rest wasn’t easy, and I deserved every quip and wisecrack. Yearned for it, actually.

His grip on me grew hot and heavy—something else I yearned for. “If I’d known you had an artistic vision in mind, I wouldn’t have acted so rashly.” I might not have slept with Finch.

His thumb moved a fraction, a slight drag downward, and his attention fastened on my lips. “You would have defaced her one way or another. You were always impulsive like that.”

“That doesn’t change how scary that suitcase is.” How terrifying being close to August was.

He cast a searching glance at my face, as though reading the double-entendre in my words. “This is uncharted territory. We always fear what we don’t know.”

I couldn't be sure if he was talking about me or the suitcase-bomb dropped on my life, but I met his probing gaze, taking in his full physique. He really had filled out the past nine years, the sleeves of his soccer jersey cutting into his biceps. Strong veins mapped his tanned forearms and big hands. He had a bold Roman nose, thick eyelashes. Darker circles cradled his hazel eyes, but they upped his hot factor, broodiness always a turn-on for me. The hint of stubble dusting the severe cut of his jaw didn't hurt either.

It also didn't hide the scar on his chin.

I'd sat with him after he'd sliced it on the Wheelers' broken window, the two of us having snuck into that abandoned home like we'd been FBI. Always messing around. We'd sat facing each other afterward, on my bedroom floor, our knees touching, my hand on his face as I held a wet towel to the gash. We were fifteen then, and I'd wanted to kiss him.

I was one day from twenty-eight now, and I wanted to *devour* him.

There was no way this big, gorgeous man returned the sentiment, but his hands were on my hips, the slightest tremble to his grip. What could he see before him but a betrayer?

Disoriented, I eased away from him and knelt in front of the case. "You know what this means, right?"

He cleared his throat. "You might learn your mother was an eighties club kid?"

Not even close. I still couldn't believe this was happening, that August was with me for this wild turn of events. Who got lost luggage returned after seventeen years?

I wanted to unpack the man behind me as much as I wanted to dissect this new treasure. Find out every country and town he'd toured, what cool foods he'd eaten in Japan, if writing music felt as cathartic as it seemed, if being on the road was lonely or exhilarating. We weren't there yet. Not close. Not friends, even. We might never get there.

Better to stick with safer topics, like why this suitcase fascinated me.

Hands on the hard plastic, I glanced at him over my shoulder. I was about to tell him there could be clues about my father in here, but the hope taunted me, the hours I'd spent ransacking my mother's room proof I was grasping at straws, wishing for the impossible.

With August here, though, the impossible no longer seemed unattainable. Still, I latched on to his humor instead. "You nailed it, but if Mary Hamilton loved the rave scene, *I'm* an arachnid scientist with a penchant for mayonnaise."

I got off on bungee jumping and would kill to surf a fifty-foot swell, but drop an eight-legged critter near me or force mayonnaise down my throat, and I'd scream bloody murder.

August's good humor returned. "I ruined you, didn't I?"

"You were an evil mastermind." Who'd hidden a trove of plastic spiders in my room and had snuck gross mayonnaise on my turkey sandwiches. He'd also ruined me for men, unbeknownst to him, my history littered with nothing but assholes until my dating hiatus this year. No one had ever compared to August.

I kept my focus on the suitcase, grounding my wobbly hands on the cool metal, still aware of my former best friend behind me. His sneakers scuffed the floor. To leave? Walk out of my life again? I'd taken care of my mother's funeral arrangements on my own, had dealt with her will, was packing her life into boxes.

But this...

I didn't want to unearth more of her past alone. I didn't know how to ask for August's support. I kept talking instead. "As far as I know, my mother never left San Francisco. Never took so much as a weekend getaway. And I was eleven when this supposedly went missing. I'd remember her traveling, wouldn't I?" It also seemed weird it turned up today. With August. The day before my birthday. "Why am I nervous to open it? This is worse than skydiving."

"Since when do you skydive?"

His question proved how far we'd fallen away from each other. He didn't know me now, the woman I'd become. When I didn't reply, he said, "It's just stuff, Gwen. Nothing in there can hurt you."

He was wrong about that. "Says the guy who grew up with a great family."

"It wasn't as peachy as it seemed. Nowhere near what you went through, but we have our issues."

I almost turned at his bitter tone, but I didn't want to acknowledge the part I'd played in their family discord. I also couldn't look away from the suitcase. "Will you stay while I open it?"

I had no right to ask August for anything. He probably came by to clear the air between us, find the closure we both clearly needed, or to reinstate his anger—fodder for his songwriting. (He could name his next gem "Girl Who Can't Forget the Past.") Some nerve I had, asking him for support now.

"Of course," came his quiet reply.

I stayed focused on the case, couldn't look at his expression as I faced my mother's history. But he was here. *Of course*. He would let me lean on him. *Of course*. He'd forever be the only person who could calm me. *Of course*.

"Thank you," I whispered.

I heard him move, felt the heat of his palm on my back. Magnetically, I curved forward, rounding my spine into his tender touch. I closed my eyes.

Three extended beats later, he moved away, my serenity leaving with him. "Take your time with her stuff," he said. "I'll make myself at home."

Easier said than done in a packed-up house, but August knew these walls as well as me. He'd been the one to make pencil marks in the pantry every year I grew taller. He moved that way now, toward the kitchen, farther from me. The distance felt physically painful. I also appreciated it; he always knew what I needed.

I examined the relic before me. Billy Idol stickers. INXS. Depeche Mode. I traced the stained graphics, beyond baffled. Maybe someone had lent my mother the case. Someone who'd enjoyed music and had let loose. Someone who hadn't shuffled through a quiet life.

Afraid to disturb its contents, I eased the suitcase on its side and opened it. A musty smell hit me full force. I rubbed my nose, but the stale aroma stuck to my nostrils. Seventeen years of confined clothing.

Clothes I couldn't believe had belonged to my mother.

Sitting cross-legged, I pulled out one item at a time: a neon windbreaker, high-waisted jeans, a micro-mini skirt, bright tank tops that would fit Barbie-Man. She would have been twenty-eight when this went missing, not sixteen. The styles were as baffling as the concert stickers, until I noticed the *Rolling Stone* magazine below, from 1990.

The year I was born.

Could these contents and band stickers have been from then? They certainly fit the bill, but that wouldn't explain the eleven-year gap between being packed and sent on a Greyhound bus.

More confused than ever, I spent time with each piece, smoothed the worn fabrics, tried to picture my mother in something other than black, white, gray, or beige. She'd kept her hair short, her shoes functional and flat. Whoever *this* Mary Hamilton had been, she'd had questionable taste, too, but colorful.

Two pairs of shoes were below her clothing. One was a cute set of beaded sandals. Sandals I'd actually wear. I ran my fingers over the blue beads, unsure how this miniskirt wearing, INXS-loving girl had had the color sucked from her life. Except the possible answer had my throat feeling thick. If the *Rolling Stone* date was the more accurate one, if these contents *were* from 1990, not 2001, then *I* was the thing that had sucked her color dry.

I'd been the child she hadn't wanted.

I clenched and unclenched my hands, unsure why my heart rate had picked up. I didn't love my mother. Miss her? Not on your life. She was unimportant, a barely-there blip on my ancestral radar. So why was I zoning out, staring at nothing while my lungs worked double-time?

Too much history had been unearthed today. August. My WTF. My crappy childhood. *August*. An unhealthy amount of time passed as I touched those sandals.

Eventually, I shook my head and reached for the other shoes. These were odd—soft black leather with laces and small square heels. Deep creases ringed the middles as though the arches had been bent every which way. Jazz shoes? For dancing? I snorted out a laugh. This was too much. Picturing my mother taking a bong hit was easier than imagining her shaking jazz hands. These couldn't belong to a woman who'd never listened to music.

I turned the soft shoes over, ran my fingers along the soles and laces. Inside the heel was a scribbled name: *Mary Hamilton*. My breath caught.

That tiny scrawl shot this reality home, confirming beyond a doubt these belongings had been hers. The mother I'd come to resent had lived a phantom life.

I moved faster, going through her toiletries (red lipstick, the woman had red lipstick!), sifting through her lacy underwear, and a bible. The bible made sense. From what I knew of my grandparents, they were religious. The zealot sort whose lives revolved around church. I set the book aside, along with every other article she'd lost. Nothing pointed to any friends she'd had, or a boyfriend. I still couldn't accurately gauge what year it was all from. It was just stuff, like August had said.

That didn't stop me from another exhaustive analysis, the same intense focus I used at my job.

When couples applied for adoption, I double, triple, and quadruple checked their facts, making sure babies were matched with the right parents. If Mary Hamilton had applied

for a baby from me, I wouldn't have allowed her to adopt a Home Economics egg.

But every day, I made families whole. I helped babies land in loving homes, with caring parents who would nurture and protect them, everything I never had.

I applied the same extensive analysis to the artifacts before me. I turned every item of clothing inside out. I checked the edges of the suitcase. I flipped through the entire *Rolling Stone* issue, finding nothing but one dog-eared page: a “fancy” boombox advertising quality CD sound. Totally cool and retro, but not a clue to my father's identity or the suitcase's origin.

I started again.

Partway through my third pass, strumming teased my ears. August. I blinked at my surroundings, unsure how long I'd been searching through the case. A glance at my phone told me almost two hours had passed. Two hours, and August was still here. He must have found my old guitar among the boxes. My small pile of memories I couldn't part with.

He played a quiet tune, familiar soft notes: America's “Horse with No Name,” the first song he'd ever taught me. The simple melody flowed with only two chords, easy to teach. August had sat with his legs around me, my back rounded against his chest, his fingers moving mine along the strings. I'd figured it out pretty quick, but had pretended to struggle—to keep him close, to keep his hands on mine, to pretend I'd been brave enough to spin and press my lips to his.

His choice of song pulled at me. The nostalgia in here must be getting to him, too. Forgetting the mess I'd made on the floor, I leaned on my hand to push to my feet and sneak a peek of him, only to realize my mother's bible had gotten lost under my debris. It caved slightly when I picked it up, the middle of it denting. Odd.

I shifted to my knees and opened the cover. “Holy shit,” I murmured.

My pulse was back to hammering, a frantic tune drowning August's soft song. My mother, the apparent rebel, had cut out

the interior of her bible like she'd been an undercover agent. Inside her hidey hole was a journal.

Carefully, I extricated the journal from its hiding spot and opened the cover. I grinned at the scrawled note:

*If you're reading this, you've stolen my property. Put it back or face the consequences.*

The dates inscribed in the top right corner edged the grin from my face: 1989-1990. I reached out to touch the writing, but yanked my hand back.

This wasn't a coincidence. These dates matched the magazine and clothing styles. These contents must have been from that time. It didn't explain why the bag had gone missing in 2001, but not much about this suitcase arriving at my mother's door made sense.

What was startlingly clear was that I held a diary. One written by mother, encompassing the times during which I'd been conceived and born.

This could lead me to my father.

No matter how often I'd asked her who he was growing up, she'd clam up. No hints given, only bitter sneers or blank stares. Now I had a hidden journal from the year I was conceived. *Be careful what you wish for.* The cautious saying looped through my mind as I steadied my breath and shook out my hands, like I was readying to touch hot coals.

I may have spent my entire teenage and adult life desperate for this knowledge, but it suddenly seemed daunting. This journal had the power to rewrite my past and shape my future, and not all shapes were pretty. Still, I opened it.

I flipped the pages. Each was filled with writing, some with taped receipts or mementos, a *Dead Calm* movie stub. She printed her sentences, instead of writing in cursive, making her entries seem more youthful than the handwriting I recalled. More proof of the journal's dating.

August's strumming got louder, and I clutched my treasure to my chest. My birthday was tomorrow. That left thirty-three hours before the clock struck midnight. It meant I might not lose my resolution to find my father. Not that resolutions could be lost, and I was no Cinderella whose life would revert to pumpkin status, but Rachel and Ainsley had been so happy since fulfilling their wishes. I'd figured I'd lost my chance.

Now I had pages full of possible clues to find my father. Picking through them on my timeline was sketchy, but I never backed down from a challenge. I surfed on them, jumped off them, scaled them. This was no different.

And I might not have to do it alone.

I made my way to the kitchen, to August, my original partner in crime, and stopped outside the doorway. He had shoved boxes aside and sat on one of the two wooden chairs that had once circled the small breakfast table. The only talking that had occurred while I'd hunched on that seat had been when my mother would berate me for not cleaning the bathroom properly, or leaving my shoes askew by the door, or tracking mud into the house.

*Listen for once in your life*, she'd scold. Always calling me a disappointment.

The silent meals had been preferable, another reason August would invite me for dinner, where I'd barely eat. Overwhelmed with the laughing and teasing between him and Finch, their parents, and their little sister, Melody, I'd often forget about the food.

Shaking off the memories, I tiptoed closer to August. His eyes were closed, his fingers gliding over the fretboard like wind strumming leaves. I'd felt those callused fingers on my face once. His lips on mine. I still remembered the heat of his tongue and soft-wet press of his mouth. Or maybe I didn't. Maybe I'd relived it so often, I'd fabricated every glorious detail.

But the guitar in his hands was real. He'd bought it for me, his attempt to fill my stark life with vibrancy. When I'd get tired of learning, he'd go off on tangents, practicing riffs and

licks while I'd imagine licking him. He wouldn't leave until I'd smile. He'd always done stuff like that, little-big things that changed my world, but the efforts had often been too overt, pity-filled attempts to fix me, like I was broken, a project, a challenge. They'd inflame my insecurity, leading me to pushing him away.

I wanted nothing more than for him to stay in my life now, any way I could have him. As a friend. As a partner in crime. *As more.*

My pathetic heart hiccupped at the impossibility.

That didn't stop me from testing my limits with him. "August." My voice was so thin and scratchy, he didn't open his eyes. I swallowed hard and said his name louder, with confidence.

His fingers kept playing, but he focused on me, eyelids hooded, intensity darkening his gaze. He moved as he strummed, a slight rocking of his shoulders. His sneaker tapped the floor softly. Normally, at concerts, August would wear threadbare jeans and slim T-shirts, *not* that I'd watched all his YouTube videos.

Even in workout shorts, a yellow jersey, and sneakers, he looked delicious. He also kept staring at me. He licked his lips. I couldn't feel mine. His mouth softened imperceptibly, tilting up in one corner, as though I *had* inspired every love ballad he'd ever written.

Unable to contemplate that unlikelihood, and my constant need to read into everything August—because I was more cuckoo than a store of clocks—I blurted the one thing I had no right to say. "Will you help me find my father?"



---

3:30 P.M.

32 ½ HOURS...



## AUGUST

My fingers slipped on the guitar strings, a ridiculous fumble on the world's easiest song. I hadn't strummed "Horse with No Name" in an eternity. The simple tune came with too many memories. Here, in this house, I couldn't fight the pull.

I could practically feel Gwen wiggling between my legs as she'd struggle through the basic chords, no clue to the torture she doled out. I'd have to harness my fantasies back then, focus on my hippie aunt's unshaven legs or run soccer plays in mind to keep the action behind my zipper in check.

Hearing my name from her lips now zoomed me back to that time, those days, and my fascination with her. How Finch would wind me up or a lost soccer match would get me down, and Gwen would nag me until I was nestled beside her on the couch, watching *Gilmore Girls*, a show I'd never admit to liking. I'd toss popcorn at her face. She'd stick her stinky socks in my face.

And the world had been right.

Even now, all this chaos between us, somehow I was more right. I wasn't staring out a train window as foreign towns slipped past, melancholy lyrics teasing my fingertips. I wasn't dating a woman for a month or two only to lose interest, lose the connection, the attraction. Around Gwen, I felt grounded, yet alive. Still slightly resentful when it came to her, but I liked it—that fiery spark.

Until she said, “Will you help me find my father?”

A sour note plunked from the guitar, mimicking the dread churning my gut. My lungs pinched. How had I let things go this far?

Gwen prattled over my guilt-ridden silence. “I know I’m the last person you’d like to help. Trust me, I get it. But I found a journal hidden in my mother’s bible, from when I was conceived, and something tells me it’ll lead to my dad. If you say no, I’ll totally understand, but don’t you think it’s odd? This case showing up before my birthday? After my mom died? With you, the same day?” Her eyes were wide, filled with hope.

I prayed my face didn’t show the unease lurching inside me. *Right now. Tell her now.* Except I wanted more time with her, more of that turbulent grounding she inspired. An oxymoron maybe, but there was no other way to describe the storminess she stirred, all wild and unpredictable. Around her I smiled one minute, bit out cutting remarks the next, the space between filled with unease and a burning lust to show her what she’d ruined. What she’d stolen from both of us.

I wanted to fuck her, raw and rough.

It was a painful ache. It should also never happen, not with our history, but I couldn’t shake the need to be around her, to learn her. The second I admitted why I’d come, she’d disappear from my life for good.

That pinching in my lungs worsened.

She kept talking over herself. “You know what? Forget I asked. It was selfish.” She popped her left knee and fiddled with the bible in her hand. “You’re busy and touring and probably have a thousand things to do, and I’m asking too much. I’m just glad you stayed. It’s appreciated, and while you’re here, I can at least give you this.”

She placed the bible down and rustled through an open box while I stayed silent. I clutched the guitar with one hand, spun my pick around the fingers of my other. *Over. Over. Under. Under.* The smooth edges flew in a familiar pattern.

Gwen faced me, her neck and cheeks flushed. “I found a few mementos the past month, stuff I couldn’t toss.” She moved closer, by my knees, and held out a felt circle.

No matter my raging turmoil, I couldn’t fight my laugh. “You still have that thing?”

“And our old class pictures, which I won’t let you see.”

“But you rocked those braces.”

“It’s more the frilly blouses my mother made me wear. They’ve all been burned.”

I eased the guitar to the floor and smiled at the badge Gwen had made for me. In the middle, stitched with wonky black thread, it read:

*August Cruz*

*Badass PI*

She’d made them, one for each of us, when our neighbor’s garden gnome had gone missing. Our sleuthing had never turned up the ugly statue, but she’d pull out our badges when we’d hunt down clues about her father. Those hours had often revolved around Gwen riffling through her mother’s purse, finding stray business cards, then trolling the internet for leads, sure her father’s name would turn up. We’d stalk men she’d find and show them photos of Gwen’s mom.

All futile searches, but I’d loved the softness of the felt PI badge in my pocket. A connection to Gwen.

She stepped between my knees and placed the badge over my stuttering heart. “It was stupid to keep it, but...” She shrugged, flattening her palm on my chest. Her chest expanded as fully as mine, more color flushing her olive skin.

I spun the guitar pick around my fingers, faster, faster. My thoughts skittered as quickly. And *bam*, the Zap was back. An electric surge.

I wanted to latch my hands around her hips and tug her to me. Slip my hands down the front of her pants and stroke her silky heat, feel everything I’d been denied. Slam my cock into

her, hard, fast, dirty. I also wanted to press my forehead into her abdomen and whisper how much I'd missed her.

Surprisingly, I didn't want to tell her off. Not anymore.

Especially since the anger I'd nursed hadn't been directed solely at her.

As twins at the same school, Finch and I had occasionally lusted after the same girls. He'd even fooled around with Kayla before we'd hooked up. I'd made sure he was cool with me asking her out before anything happened, but he knew how I'd felt about Gwen. I'd told him, grumpy and often, how worried I'd been to make a move on her and screw things up, lose her friendship.

Not just for me, but more for her.

I was all Gwen had. If I'd ruined that, she'd have been left with nothing.

I'd nearly pulled out my hair when I'd heard about her dating that Jared douche. I'd been miserable about it, and Finch knew. He'd even promised to look out for her after she'd cut me off, because I'd been worried about her. He'd agreed to my request. Not without asking for a favor in return. A doozy of a favor. I'd held up my end of our bargain.

Turns out "looking out for Gwen" translated to Finch as "banging her."

There was intent with that. Premeditation. Especially after what I'd done for him. It had ignited our growing tension, stress Gwen never knew about. I'd assumed Gwen had been screwing with me, too. That they'd gone out of their way to hurt me. Nine years later, she confessed her actions had been a result of her messed up childhood, her past warping her choices.

And here she was, hand pressed to my aching chest, affection in her eyes.

As though my limbs had a mind of their own, I anchored my hand over hers, flattening our palms. "Do you have a boyfriend?"

So tightly clasped against me, I felt her hand flinch. *I damn well flinched*: I hadn't planned to blurt the question that had dogged me since knocking on her door.

She bit her lip and shook her head. "Not for a while."

I exhaled heavily.

Her fingers dug deeper into my chest, her thumb sinking between my pecs, and my cock thickened. "Do you?" she asked, almost breathless. "A girlfriend, I mean. Women must throw themselves at you." She winced slightly, as though a headache had set in.

"No one important," I said. No one worth writing songs about, good or bad.

"Oh."

Oh, was right.

*Oh, we're both single.*

*Oh, we're both still attracted to each other.*

*Oh, I might finally be able to work out my Gwen addiction in a rough session between the sheets.*

Except my remorse resurfaced, the stupid decisions that had brought me here tamping the urge.

Trembling slightly, she pulled her hand back, and that silly PI patch clung to my shirt, an echo of our past. Heat echoed from her touch. A reverberation I'd felt for nine years. This connection was probably why I'd never had a real relationship. I could blame it on my music and traveling all I liked, but every woman who'd moved through my life had been a bridge, a transition that filled song gaps. Gwen was the refrain and chorus, the addictive hook that wormed into your mind.

A habit I was struggling to break.

Staying seated, I slowed my breaths and plucked the badge off my jersey. I tucked it into the waistband of my shorts.

She watched my every move, crossed and uncrossed her arms. "Rachel, who you met, wanted me to meet them for drinks in"—she glanced at the microwave clock, her hips still

in grabbing distance—“a couple hours. I’d like to go home and read the journal a bit beforehand, but you could come, if you want. To the bar. Since you know Owen and Jimmy.”

“You want me to meet your friends?”

“They’re your friends, too.” She huffed out an incredulous laugh. “Because, you know, today isn’t strange enough, we also have the same friends. Which I totally don’t get. How’d I never meet them?”

I thought back to those years, my hours split between playing guitar, school, soccer, and Gwen time. “We hung out after practice, nights when you were studying.” Always cracking the books, struggling with her grades.

“The soccer guys,” she mumbled, as though to herself. Then louder, “That’s what you’d say: ‘I’m going out with the soccer guys.’”

Guys who’d turned into men that Gwen now knew. We shared baffled looks.

It really was one hell of a coincidence. Fate, that sneaky little devil, toying with our lives—the way her betrayal had launched my music career, and her mother had launched me back into Gwen’s life. Like both of us single now, launched together.

I still hadn’t answered her about searching for her father, hadn’t said yes or no or admitted my screw-up. There was also this unrelenting *thing* between us that went beyond fierce attraction and residual resentment, that maybe, *maybe* she’d always be the one for me. There’d been no one since Gwen. No one meaningful.

Here, with her, there was meaning in every breath and pause.

That left me existing in no man’s land, wondering if those weighted beats meant Gwen and I still had a chance at... something, yet I was withholding vital information from her.

Unsure how to proceed, I nodded. “I need to shower and change at my hotel, but I can meet you there.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“You’re coming with me?”

“I’m coming with you.” I hated that we’d been reduced to this—once inseparable, now questioning a simple outing with friends.

“Will you keep repeating everything I say?” she asked.

“Only if you keep stating the obvious.”

She flicked my shoulder, and I squeezed the sensitive spot above her knee. She squealed, a sound I’d always loved. Happy Gwen. Giddy Gwen. She went to pinch my nipple, her go-to move, but I batted her hand away. I grabbed her waist and tugged her onto my lap, her back flush against my chest. Nowhere for her hands to roam. “You’re getting slow in your old age.”

She quit squirming. “You’re getting faster.”

And harder. She probably felt it, my erection free to roam in my workout shorts. Minimal contact was all it took. Like I was a teen again, my body always quick to respond to her. Needing to regain control, I eased her off my lap, but gripped her waist too long. Felt each of her lean muscles through her thin tank top. “You’ve been working out.”

“CrossFit,” she murmured while she stepped back and faced me, adjusting her camo pants. “But I’m considering taking up pole vaulting.” Her eyes focused on my groin.

The pole in question twitched, and my mind was back to ricocheting, too much stimulus—good and bad—to focus on one thing. I could handle this, though. Subtle flirting while we figured out what the hell to do with each other. While I figured out my next move. “I’d think you were already a skilled vaulter.”

“The poles I’ve used tend to buckle under pressure.”

“Then I guess you need a steadier pole. Something longer and firmer?”

I imagined her cupping the length of me, stroking me until I roared. Fantasies I should curb.

She touched her collarbone, ran her fingers toward the dip at her throat. “I need a pole that can go the distance. The kind that can support my weight.”

Her tone wavered from coy to uncertain. Trepidation that probably had little to do with me. The burden of her mother’s lost luggage must be affecting her. Unclaimed baggage, filled with years of neglect. I cocked my head, hoping the motion would organize my jumbling thoughts. Sex. Want. Guilt. Ire. The need to take Gwen in my arms and whisper soothing words.

Our eyes locked again and the air snapped, the way an extended note vibrated and hummed.

Abruptly, she hugged her waist. “Is your number the same? Should I text you where to meet?”

“My number hasn’t changed.”

Gwen suddenly had. She was on the move, snatching up the bible and journal. She stacked them in the open box that had held my PI badge. Her shoulder-length hair dipped forward, a wavy curtain covering her face.

To avoid looking at me? To avoid this intensity binding us, whether we wanted it to, or not?

Not surprising with the day’s craziness. I needed to stop thinking with my body, too. My bruised and battered heart. A shower would do me good. A cold one. An ice bath, maybe. Something to remind me why I’d avoided Gwen all this time, her ability to unbalance me powerful, the details I hadn’t shared enough to end this reunion for good.

If I could nurse the anger I’d harbored the past nine years, it would help me confess about her father and move on. Stop pretending the two of us could water these fledgling feelings, grow something good out of them.

Watching her gather and pack a tiny box that represented her few good childhood memories silenced that notion. She’d endured so much growing up, too much the past month, me

and this lost luggage adding to her stress. The grudge I'd harbored seemed childish now. We'd been kids back then. Stupid. Led by our fears, unsure who we were and who we should be.

Today, I was a lonely musician who missed his best friend. Today, I was a man struggling to tame his desire for his first and only love.



## GWEN

I couldn't gather my paltry box fast enough. If I could eject myself from this overheating kitchen, that had shrunk with August in it, I'd strap myself in and brace for impact. One second I was ready to grab his *pole* and test how high it could make me jump, the next I couldn't stop remembering the rabbit hole I'd fallen into after my WTF.

Losing August back then had been a sledgehammer to my heart. For two years I'd wallowed, barely going out. Self-imposed isolation. Until I'd met Rachel and Ainsley. The girls had reminded me there was life after a shattered heart, but the extent to which I'd suffered wasn't something one forgot.

I was twenty-seven now, not nineteen, but the San Francisco fault line had nothing on my shoddy foundation.

One moment on August's *aroused* lap, and the cracks under my feet showed.

I shuffled across the white linoleum floor, glancing at him as he returned my guitar to its case. His strong back stretched his jersey, his shoulder blades shifting with each move. My Badass PI partner.

Of our investigative duo, he'd been the clever one, quick to decipher leads and solve problems as we'd hunt down clues. I was the sneaky one who'd sweet talked "suspects" and "informants," donning my meager acting skills.

Anything to spend more time with August.

He hadn't agreed to investigate with me today, only to join my friends for a drink. The possibility of combing the city with him sounded too good to be true, grinding on his pole sounded even better, but we'd spent the last nine years ignoring each other, angry and hurt. Me ashamed and pissed at myself. August furious with *me*. Not the kind of history suited to unearthing parental information that could trigger my own personal earthquake.

That didn't lessen my internal tug-of-war: I wanted him with me for this daunting scavenger hunt. I wanted him playing me songs, flirting with me, possibly *thrusting his pole inside me*. An electrifying and petrifying prospect.

Which meant I needed to focus on one sure thing: August and I were friends. We had been, at least. A relationship I wanted back. A fling might calm the fire one look from him stirred, but he could never be a one-night stand, and we'd never be more, certainly not today, with this journal and the challenging hours ahead of me.

Finding my father was priority one.

August trailed me from the kitchen. He wasn't even close, but I could barely breathe through the feverish grip on my lungs.

"So, we'll meet in a couple hours?" he asked.

Hopefully long enough to get these hot flashes under control. "Five thirty. I'll text you."

He opened the front door and reached toward me. "Give that to me."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "What?" My heart? My soul? He owned both already.

"The box. So you can lock up."

Right. The box I was holding. So I could lock up.

Even his simple gesture had me picking apart his intentions. The action also had me all thumbs.

What should have been a simple handoff of a small box went haywire when his hand brushed my arm. I squeaked and fell into him. The box tumbled to the ground, his arm came around my waist, and my hand grazed his *pole*.

He grunted, short and harsh. I should have moved my hand. A normal person who needed to be only platonic with her ex-best friend while she chased down leads on her ghosted father should have moved her hand. I *did* move my hand, but it was more of a needy slide.

Air hissed through his teeth. “Do that again, Gwen, and I’ll toss you over my shoulder, take you up to your childhood bedroom, and live out the dirty fantasies that kept me up for most of high school.”

Good Lord.

I jumped back and smacked my shoulder into the doorframe. My lungs had practically incinerated, burned up with my unquenched desire. Still, I managed to say, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He was breathing hard, too, and he smirked.

He wasn’t a smirker. He was a hate-song writer. I couldn’t get my head around it all. “What are we doing?”

“Honestly?”

“No, August. I’d like you to lie to me so I can continue acting like a moron. I don’t even know why you came by or why you’re in town.” Most of his family lived in Chicago now. He didn’t have a house here.

His lips tipped into a frown. “I’m not really sure anymore.”

“Why you’re in town, or what we’re doing?”

He dragged a hand through his dark hair. The strands were shorter than they used to be, but they still had a slight curl, that one lick up top defying gravity. I itched to smooth it down. Touching him wasn’t smart, and I was a smart girl. A together girl. A girl who needed to focus.

“I came home to take care of some personal business,” he said cryptically. “As for us, I’d like to hang out this afternoon. We’ll take it from there.”

A loony laugh escaped me. “We’ll take it from there?”

“Now who’s repeating who?”

“You do know how weird this is, right? You and me hanging out and...” I glanced at his crotch, the loose fabric tented slightly. For a second, I wondered if that personal business had to do specifically with me, but the possibility was laughable. His brother lived here. He likely had music contacts in the area, too. Still, he’d shown up at my mother’s door, looking for me.

He shrugged an unaffected shoulder, like our flirting didn’t mock the laws of nature. “I’ve decided to stop analyzing it.”

He bent to gather the few things that had tumbled from my box, and I froze. It was one thing to give him his Badass PI badge, but each memento littering the walkway—the only keepsakes I’d saved from my childhood—were all linked to the man bent over them. Every last one.

My first Wonder Woman comic—his gift when I’d won my track meet.

The *Die Hard* DVD he’d sent over when I’d been holed up with mono.

Every homemade birthday card he’d slipped into my locker.

He righted the box and returned the escaped items, but paused on each one. My throat closed. They were damning, hard proof I’d never gotten over him. The longer he lingered, the hotter my neck burned. Mortification over my obvious obsession with him winded me, along with hope he’d understand how important he’d been in my life.

Seeing as we’d never unleashed our monolithic sexual tension, *his* flirting made sense. A quick fuck could offer him closure, even though it would ruin me. This evidence wasn’t simple flirting. This was proof of a deep emotional scar, years of missing him nurtured and splayed on flagstone.

I expected him to stand, make some excuse about a forgotten appointment or meeting. Flee the scene of the crime. Instead he placed my mother's journal over our memories and stood, facing me. "I have a picture of you on my laptop, from our trip to the zoo, with you making faces at the chimpanzees. I've switched computers over the years, had plenty of opportunity to delete it. I never could."

He smiled a sad smile, his gaze traveling over my face and landing on my lips. He licked his, a slow slide of his tongue. Then he turned and jogged to his car.

My heart jogged in time.



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5:00 P.M.

31 HOURS...



GWEN

A frosty shower later, I pulled on dark jeans and a white tank top, ready to meet my friends for a drink. *Not* continue obsessing over a certain someone who'd be joining me. I would not admit to modeling five different outfits beforehand, when I should have been analyzing my mother's journal. I had *not* applied two different shades of lipstick before settling on a rosy gloss. I also *hadn't* performed these neurotic acts while listening to August's latest album.

Nope. Not me.

God, I was pathetic.

Looking in the mirror now, I barely recognized myself. My ruffled bangs swept to the side like usual, my chestnut waves as ordered as I could get them. My cheekbones still stood out, my right eye slightly rounder than the left, and the rock climbing scrape on my forearm still lingered. Put the facts together, and I hadn't changed one iota. But since adulthood, I'd never lost my mind over a man.

Here I was, cracked out over August.

Before this year's dating hiatus, I'd made an effort when meeting men, trying to look pretty, putting my best foot forward and all that jazz. Never had my efforts involved a frustrating fashion show and clothes-littered floor. It was time to get my act together.

I used my last half hour to curl on my couch and pore over my mother's journal, the analytical work more calming than I'd have thought. It was methodical. It gave my mind something to latch onto, other than the fact that August had saved a photo of me. Did he look at it often? Had it haunted him the way my keepsakes of him had haunted me?

I growled into my empty apartment, annoyed August had thwarted my focus again.

I focused harder and flipped more journal pages, frustrated when some stuck together, causing me to miss sections. Not that all my mother's random entries were gems. Her "I hate my mom" rant could have been written by me and most kids during their teen years, but Mary Hamilton's malice had stemmed from forced church attendance, a strict dress code, curfew, and TV limitations.

Partway through, a cutout of a ballerina stopped my flipping. A quick browse showed more dance pictures and corresponding entries, my mother writing things like:

*Dancing is everything. The music makes me feel alive.  
I would rather die than not dance.*

Those jazz shoes must have been her prized possession. I suddenly wished I hadn't left the suitcase at her house. I wanted to wear her shoes, experience that passion. The possibility puckered my mouth. There was no point searching for something that had died long ago. There was only the here and now. This reality.

Journal in my lap, I glanced around my small apartment. It was generally neat, the open kitchen and living area decorated in shades of blue and gray. My leather couch was comfy, the closets big enough to store my rock climbing equipment and diving gear. The slate walls were bare except for the surfboard and mountain bike taking up real estate. There were no family photos. No snapshots of birthdays or weddings or celebrations. My mother had only ever visited my place once, because I'd asked her over. That painful hour had involved both of us checking the time repeatedly.

Mary Hamilton may have had interests and passions as a teen, but that wasn't the woman she'd become. The only thing I wanted to find in these pages were clues to the man she'd slept with, a visual that turned my insides to *ick*.

Eye on the time, I studied the dance pages for a hint. A partner she'd waltzed with? A boy who'd picked her up from class? Assuming she'd taken classes. That part wasn't clear. What did repeat was the acronym TASC.

Tucking my legs under me on the couch, I searched my phone for the term and gawked at the landing page.

*Tenderloin Arts and Spiritual Center: a community space in the Tenderloin district where art and culture and spirituality come together.*

Spirituality? If I'd sipped the water on my coffee table before reading that, I'd have done a spit take. It was easier picturing my mother as a tattooed biker than getting spiritual in the Tenderloin—San Francisco's seedy epicenter. Granted the area was changing, theaters and music venues drawing different crowds, but those streets had crawled with drug dealers and prostitutes back then.

Oh, crap...*prostitutes*.

Visions of spitting water vanished as my mouth dried.

What if young Mary Hamilton had worked the street? What if she'd run away from her controlling parents, only to wind up knocked up and devastated?

*Be careful what you wish for.*

I toyed with the journal's edges, debated closing it, choosing ignorance over truths better left unknown. It would mean giving up, and I didn't give up. I worked harder, did more reps, lifted heavier weights. All to reach my potential.

I'd set a goal for myself last year, and this journal was my chance to reach that target. Giving up was losing. Giving up meant failure. Giving up meant I'd have nothing to focus on besides August Cruz.

Nose back in the book, I scanned a few more pages and noticed a “him.” No names or specific descriptions, just:

*He watched me dance today.*

*I saw him at TASC.*

When I spotted the intimate tidbit: *I’m dying to kiss him*, my hands shook. This was my first clue. A real lead, not the stupid window washer business cards I’d stolen from my mother’s purse. There had been a boy at this TASC place.

Possibly my father.

Part of me wanted to keep reading, but the reality of August and these clues tumbling into my life so suddenly had my head ready to pop. What would I say if I met my father tonight? How was I supposed to act around August later?

Thank God I’d made plans to meet the girls, a reprieve I desperately needed. A chance to find my equilibrium and unload this drama before it intensified, even though August would be there, too.

Soon, he’d be sitting with us, possibly flirting with me and going on about his saved photo and *pole* like the two of us could forget our past. Even worse was the possibility of him *not* flirting with me and going on about his saved photo and *pole* like the two of us could forget our past.

I wasn’t sure which option stressed me more.



Journal left in my car, I crossed the street to Sweet Pea, a cute bistro/bar we frequented. The barn-board walls and cramped wooden tables created a casual-chic vibe. I normally found the place relaxing, the country tunes not too loud. This afternoon I scanned the room as though a jack-in-the-box might spring from the floor.

My friends were at a table, drinks in hand, no August in sight. I breathed easier. It was also nice having space from the journal and the possibilities it might hold. “I hope this is for me.” I nodded to the white wine near one of two empty chairs.

Rachel squinted at me. “Should I have ordered you a bottle?”

“Do I look that bad?”

“You don’t look like you.”

Even my best friend sensed I was an imposter. “Things have happened.”

My mother things. Finding my father things. *August things*. Unsure where to begin, I sat in the seat beside Rachel. Ainsley was on her right, their boyfriends across from them. They all watched me, waiting. I sipped my wine, stalling. I tried to remember that I wasn’t alone in the complicated-relationship department.

Owen was the strong silent type, the tiniest twang to his baritone, a rugged man who’d look at home corralling sheep and saying ma’am. Here he was, smitten with Ainsley, a blond bombshell whose closet rivaled a Bloomingdale’s display. Rachel’s freckled innocence was a sharp contrast to Jimmy’s inked skin and biker style, but they’d fallen cupid stupid in love with each other.

I’d watched both girls the past year, falling in love, then not falling, then falling harder, then hurting before eventually zooming to cloud nine. I was thrilled for them. They deserved the world. Watching them find their *other* had also torn at me, on a fundamental level.

My dating hiatus the past year had been necessary. The only way to break a habit was by going cold turkey, and my asshole dependency had become a problem. Part of me had believed I didn’t deserve more; a girl who slept with her first love’s brother wasn’t high on Santa’s Nice List. Part of me was just plain tired of no man ever measuring up to the one who owned my heart.

I did want my *other*, though. I dreamed of it. Yearned for that and more.

A family of my own.

If it didn't happen one day, I'd toss my name in the adoption pool, find a baby who needed a loving mother, someone who would support her, rub her back when sick, celebrate the highs and commiserate for the lows. I would do it, on my own if need be. It wasn't my first choice. I wanted the whole package, but there was only one man I'd ever imagined in that role. A virtual impossibility, no matter our earlier flirtations.

I sighed into my wine.

Ainsley nudged Rachel, the two of them striking up conversation as though I wasn't there. "Is this because of the soccer guy? Her old crush?"

"Considering he showed up at her mother's house unannounced, I'd go with yes."

"I need details."

"Do you ever." Rachel looked as bewildered as when I'd confessed my WTF. "But it's not my bedtime story to tell."

I glared at the girls, who chose an inopportune time to play our Make Her Squeal game. If two of us ignored the third while hanging out, and talked about her in front of her face, the ignored friend eventually caved and spilled her stockpiled gossip. Which was what I wanted to do, break this dam holding my August and lost-luggage drama hostage.

Unfortunately, explaining it was easier in my head.

"Is he as hot up close?" Ainsley went on.

Rachel fanned her face. "Hotter."

"Damn."

"Exactly."

Jimmy lifted his wineglass, studying its garnet color through the light. A sophisticated move for such a rough guy.

“If this is how you guys talk while we’re at the table, what do you say when you’re alone?”

“Nothing,” Rachel blurted.

Ainsley tipped up her chin. “We’ll never tell.”

I snickered. I doubted he’d want to hear how we’d discussed his cock *in detail*, a fun topic we brought up with Rachel as often as possible. Anything to make our friend blush.

“Anyhoo.” Ainsley was on a roll, intent on making me crack. “What’s soccer man’s name again?”

“August.” Owen took a healthy pull on his beer. “We played with him, weekends and evenings in the California Regional League. Went to different schools, but we hung out plenty.”

The soccer guys. The coincidence still astounded me.

Jealousy would sting me every time August would go out and have fun with his friends, while I’d break my brain over calculus and science. My mother’s strict rules had also included a curfew. Another barrier to tagging along with August. I’d never ask for details about his nights, hadn’t wanted to know who he’d seen, what he’d done. Hearing about his fun would only have enflamed my envy.

But I had attended his odd soccer match, would watch from the sidelines with his family. Back then, I’d only had eyes for him. Hadn’t paid the other players a lick of attention.

Now we were all friends.

“Right. August.” Ainsley nodded at Owen like she’d forgotten the only guy I’d ever mooned to them about. The actress was being a sneak. “Was he as hot back then?”

She also had a one-track mind.

Owen’s brown eyes swirled with amusement. “Emmett asked him out once. No. Wait...” He shook his head and smiled. “Twice. It was definitely twice.”

Ainsley hitched her shoulders, hands clutched together excitedly. “Does that mean August’s gay? Is that why he and Gwen never hooked up?”

Owen’s brother was in a relationship now, but I’d heard stories about his rampant dating prior, how much of a player Emmett had been. Learning he’d hit on August when younger wasn’t a surprise. August’s hot factor had been just as high back then.

What was a surprise was having August turn up right as Ainsley asked that mortifying question.

“I’m not gay,” August said, sidling up to our table. His eyes were trained on me, skewering me with enough heat to spark a wildfire.

My breath stalled as I attempted to douse those rising flames, because *wow*, did he clean up well.

His worn jeans hugged his narrow hips, a few threads at the seams escaping. His plain black T-shirt accentuated his wide shoulders and sinewy arms. His dark hair was still damp, my favorite cowlick swimming against the current. A hint of minty aftershave wafted from his clean-shaven cheeks, and I ached to run my nose along that smooth jawline.

Until he answered the latter of Ainsley’s questions. “Gwen and I didn’t hook up because we had a misunderstanding in college, and she slept with my brother.”

Owen and Jimmy froze. Rachel and Ainsley’s eyes filled half their faces. My world tipped upside down, like I’d bungee jumped, my stomach remaining sky high while the rest of me plunged.

Ignoring the statue game going on around the table, August leisurely pulled out the chair opposite me. He slid *my* wineglass toward him and took a sip, licking his lips as he swallowed. He grinned at me.

Grinned.

At me.

If he were closer, I'd twist his nipple so hard, he'd see the Milky Way.

"Glad you could make it and turn my friends into stone," I told him, my voice rising in pitch and aggravation. "The girls and I are going to the bathroom now. Together. Like girls do. We might be a while."

My chair screeched on the concrete floor as I used my head and thumbs to gesture toward the back of the bar. Rachel and Ainsley picked up on my game of charades lickety-split and followed my hurried strides into the bathroom.

The space was decorated like a country porch, complete with cushioned seat, barn-style stalls, and sunflowers. "He's insane," I said as I fell onto the yellow cushion.

Rachel covered her mouth with her hand. "I can't believe he blurted that."

"He must want to torture me, slowly and painfully. It's his form of retribution." It was probably why he'd agreed to come out. To humiliate me. Make me look bad in front of my friends. *Our* friends. Whatever.

Ainsley's eyebrows finally descended from her hairline. "I can't weigh in on what went down until you fill me in."

I contemplated putting her off, not reliving my teenage stupidity *again*, but there was no point. It was easier this time. The confession still shamed me, but the more often I spoke about it—to Rachel, with August, now Ainsley—the easier it got. "Do you think that's why he aired our dirty laundry?"

Ainsley cocked her head. "What's why? I don't follow."

"When he showed up, that ambush of his seemed—"

"Technically," Rachel cut in, "it wasn't an ambush. He was answering Ainsley's question."

I glowered at Ainsley. "Remind me to thank you for that later."

She plucked a sunflower from a sink vase and offered it to me. "A token for my *peccadillo*."

I accepted her gift and spun the massive flower. “Have you been playing crosswords again?”

“Yes, but I cheated for that word, which means a small transgression. Like August’s fumble now. But isn’t everything better out in the open?”

“Which brings me to the point I was trying to make.” This conversation was tangling as quickly as my thoughts. “I hadn’t spoken with anyone about that night for nine years, and I get the impression August hadn’t either. Even thinking about it before made me feel like I’d eaten one of Ainsley’s vegan desserts.” I mimed an upset stomach. Served her right for the accidental ambush.

She rolled her eyes. “You guys love my baking.”

We did not, but we ate the horrible efforts anyway.

“What about now?” Rachel asked me, avoiding the vegan discussion like the good friend she was. “Do you feel less pukey about the whole thing?”

“If I stop and relive the fiasco, I start to spiral, but it’s easier. So either August wants to torment me in front of you guys, or he’s trying to lighten our history, make it less of a big deal.”

Option A meant this reunion of ours would end shortly, no friendship maintained. Option B meant he might truly want to put our past to bed. He might want *me* in that bed with him.

The possibility excited and terrified me in equal measure.

Ainsley looked over my head, at the mirror behind me. Her purple wrap dress hugged her generous curves, her small stature elevated by matching stilettos. She adjusted the tie that hung at her side. “Judging by the way he looked at you, I’d say the only tormenting he wants to do involves ropes, hot wax, and silk sheets.”

That visual had heat flooding my neck. “How was he looking at me?” I fanned my face with the massive flower.

“Like you’re a supermodel, and he’s had your picture on his wall forever, like the skimpy bikini kind, and he just

realized he gets to sex you up.”

I choked on air. “That was specific.”

Ainsley gestured toward the door, as though August was there. “So was his extensive eye-fucking. He wants bikini-poster sex.”

Too frazzled to compute that, I stroked the sunflower’s petals. “I’m in deep water here. The shark-infested kind. I mean, August is, without a doubt, the one who got away. If I had another chance with him, I’d jump at it.” Pole vault, to be precise. “But there’s been another development.”

More drama to unload, because I was living in soap opera central. Once I finished outlining the arrival of my mother’s lost luggage, the time gap between its contents and it going missing, the journal, and the first clue I’d found, the girls had sat on either side of me, scooped close in a love sandwich.

Rachel gathered my hand in hers. “Are you nervous about searching for your dad?”

Terrified. Nauseated. Overwhelmed. “Definitely.” I tried dissecting the million and one thoughts boxing my brain. “I believe we get what we get in the family department. We don’t choose our parents or siblings or relatives. I got short-strawed and made it through, but I spent a lot of years resenting my mother, and resenting myself in the process. It’s part of the reason I pushed August away back then—my shitty self-worth. And I’m worried searching for my father now could take me back to that place, but I also see finding him as a brand new chance, my last-ditch effort to have family. I have so many questions for him.”

Did he seek adrenaline rushes, too?

Had he chosen to leave me, or had Mary never told him I existed?

Did he hate mayonnaise?

Was he afraid of spiders?

When he looked out the window at the moon, did he sometimes wonder what it would be like to float through

space?

I had a journal full of questions, some silly, some scary, and I wanted to ask them all. Not at once, obviously. No sense scaring the man stiff. But the questions had built up over my teen and adult years, so many it was hard to breathe at times. Like the pressure against my breastbone would rupture if I never sat face-to-face with the man and found out who he was.

Ainsley pressed her hand to my knee. “What if he’s awful? You don’t know anything about him. Maybe there’s a good reason your mother never told you his name.”

She could be right, but the more I thought about meeting him, the greater my curiosity grew. Exactly why I’d needed to talk this out. “I think I’d rather know. I’d rather meet him and see for myself he’s an asshole. Without that, I’ll drive myself nuts.”

When families came to me, desperate to adopt, I’d warn them how long and grueling the process could be, how emotionally draining. Little good that did. Each phone call and meeting, nerves and fear would invade their voices. Wisps of hope. Nothing beat giving good news to prospective parents. I wouldn’t trade those joyful tears and hugs for anything. Letting others down often led to Ben & Jerry sessions with the girls, where we’d heckle bad reality TV and commiserate.

Still, I preferred it to the limbo of the parents not knowing. Answers, good or bad, meant they could move on. Make another choice. Reevaluate their lives. Like I had after I’d tracked down my grandparents.

That shit show had involved my grandmother asking if I’d found God, then listing all the ways young girls sinned. Instead of the cookies and tea and hugs I’d dreamed of, I’d gotten a fanatic only interested in preaching at me. The confrontation had been upsetting, but it had allowed me to quit obsessing over something I’d never have. I moved on.

Exactly what I needed to do with my dad.

Until I knew unequivocally, one way or another, if my father was a good or bad man, a drunk or a saint, funny or

mean, warm or cold, I'd exist in a perpetual state of uncertainty, those wisps of hope to one day meet him never letting me close that door to my past.

"I think knowing is better than limbo. If he's a dick, so be it." I rubbed my eyes, forgetting I'd applied more eyeliner than usual. Raccoon eyes weren't sexy.

Ainsley patted my thigh. "Then we're here for you, for whatever you need. But back to the August issue." She peered at me intently, getting up in my face. "You said you asked him to help find your father. Did he answer?"

I squirmed, remembering the solidness of him as he'd held me on his very *firm* lap. How I'd panicked afterward. "He flirted instead. And when I confronted him later, asked why he came by, he said he wasn't sure anymore."

"Your past is pretty intense," Ainsley said.

"Maybe he showed up wanting closure." Rachel's soft voice was more soothing than her words. "He could've been surprised how much he still felt for you."

That prospect was preferable. "But why now? My mom dying, the luggage, August—it all feels too coincidental. I'm not sure it's smart to deal with August with all this other...*stuff* going on."

Rachel rolled her bottom lip between her teeth. "You guys remember the blackout when we made our wish? Last year?"

It was impossible to forget that crazy night: the three of us with our eyes closed, holding hands as midnight struck, making our resolutions as a blackout had pitched the bar into darkness.

Crazy with a side of loop-dee-loo.

"Well," Rachel went on, "I kind of thought something larger was going on that night. Something bigger guiding our choices. It was part of the reason I worked so hard to realize my resolution. As far as I'm concerned, there's nothing wrong with believing in the impossible. In us being connected to unseen forces that impact our lives. You wished to find your father because it was important to you, and now you have your

mother's diary and your first love giving you sexy eyes, all before your chosen deadline. If it were me, I'd stop trying to figure out why. I'd take the breadcrumbs offered and follow their trail. Maybe August turned up for a reason."

"Aside from embarrassing me in front of my friends?"

She pinched my side. "Aside from that. But we'll laugh about it eventually."

In her dark jeans and cream blouse, adorably freckled Rachel appeared sweet and levelheaded, not like a flake who believed in crystal balls and fairy godmothers. But she was insisting August was a sign, the lost luggage fate, the diary my destiny.

The notion was wild and impossible. Or was it?

Today's strange happenings were precisely what made it hard to dismiss her hypothesis. There was no point fighting something unexplainable, especially when the mystery brought with it a certain dark-haired musician.

I'd had it bad for August since the sweltering summer day he'd invited me to run, screaming and laughing, through his sprinklers. I'd been nine years old and struck dumb by a boy with a smile big enough to brighten my somber world.

I glanced at the exit, shaky and apprehensive, knowing he was out there. "He never answered when I asked him to help me find my father. What if he says no?"

Ainsley stood and smoothed her dress. "After the comment he made, and those fuck-me eyes, there's no way he'll say no. I guarantee he's out there right now, dishing to the guys about you. Which means I need to fix your eyeliner before we go back out."

"Oh!" Rachel clapped. "It's like you guys are performing a remake of *Grease*—us girls in here, the boys out there, gossiping about your lost love. It's so romantic."

Clearly Rachel was as delusional as me, but I pictured the silly scene and smiled as my friends fussed over my smudged face.



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6:00 P.M.

30 HOURS...



## AUGUST

“You, my man, have balls of iron.” Jimmy shook his head at me, pretty much all he and Owen had done since the girls’ not-so-subtle bathroom dash.

I’d gotten away with staying mum while our waitress came by and I decided on a beer, but there was no avoiding the grenade I’d launched. “My history with Gwen is complicated.”

Owen shifted his chair forward. “I thought I had it rough with my ex-wife, but your situation seems sticky as hell. Actually...” He frowned at the blackboard menu above the bar. “Ainsley crushed on my brother before we met. If Emmett was straight, she would have slept with him. Hate to think where that would have left us.” He rubbed his chest.

I was well acquainted with that pain. “I’ve been angry with her a long time.”

Jimmy leaned his elbows on the table, dark eyes narrowing. He looked like a brute in this kitschy bar, daisies on the lime green tables, birds painted on the walls. “If you said that to upset her before, as nice as it’s been seeing you, I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

Under different circumstances, his hard tone would have my shoulders bunching toward my ears, but the ultimatum meant Gwen had people who cared for her.

“I didn’t.” I rubbed this salty day from my eyes, unsure how much to say. I rarely spoke with Finch anymore. My bandmates were cool, but we didn’t sit up at night braiding one another’s hair and swapping stories. I hadn’t seen these guys in twelve years, but some friendships defied the laws of time.

I shoved my right hand into my jeans pocket, finding one of my guitar picks. I spun it in circles. “I’ve had it bad for Gwen for as long as I can remember, and for a bunch of stupid reasons on both our parts, we never acted on how we felt. The closest we ever got was the day she turned nineteen, and she slept with my twin. But seeing her now...” My body hummed at the thought of her. “I’m tired of letting one fuck-up ruin our chances. Not sure I can let her walk away this time.”

Studying her packed box filled with our memories had knocked my head clear. She hadn’t let go of me, like I hadn’t let go of her, even though I’d tried.

I’d driven to my hotel afterward, unable to shake thoughts of her. My bitterness had dripped into the drain as I’d showered, imagining Gwen under that hot stream with me. It had thinned into nothing as I’d dressed and hopped in my car, jumpy and nervous. Not because I dreaded seeing Gwen.

Because I couldn’t wait to be with her again, anywhere near her, touching her, breathing her in.

One afternoon, and I was hooked.

Jimmy stared at me like I had carrots dangling from my nose. “So you thought you’d share your history with the group?”

I released the guitar pick and passed my hand over my mouth, wishing I’d sewn it shut. “It kind of slipped out. I’m tired of us tiptoeing around each other.”

He barked out a laugh. “*It kind of slipped out.* Have you met these girls? Ainsley will eat you for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.” The asshole kept laughing.

If making our history non-taboo helped Gwen and me rediscover our footing, it was worth it. Getting over her night

with Finch would still be a tough wall to scale, but we'd made huge strides earlier, and walking away now would leave me with less closure than before. Just a few hours with her had lyrics looping through my head, odd fragments I'd been jotting down since I'd left her mother's.

*Time licks wounds. Touch remembers. Infinite flames.*

Finch's betrayal had been more personal, complications that had stemmed from decisions made prior to that shit-storm. Gwen, I could forgive, and I meant what I'd told her earlier: I was done analyzing my actions. If I wanted to flirt with her, I would. If I wanted to touch her, tease her, kiss her, I would.

I just had to figure out what to do about her mother's letter and the news it brought.

I could come clean, explain how I'd ignored a dying woman's wishes to share Gwen's father's name. How I'd needed time to process before facing the only woman I'd ever loved. Feelings that still lingered all these years later. I could tell her I waited and delayed, procrastinating like a prick, and when I finally looked up her father the other day, to make sure he wasn't a drunk or druggie, or some skeeze who'd hurt her, the intel I discovered had punched me in the gut.

I'd sat in my car afterward, eyes squeezed to the point of pain, wishing I could turn back time.

But her father had died of a heart attack.

Eight days prior.

I'd sat on his name for two months. Because of my procrastination, Gwen would never meet her father. Because of me, she'd never talk to him and find the missing pieces of her puzzle.

The waitress set down my beer, and I grabbed it, thankful to busy my hands.

Owen reached over, knocking his bottle against mine. "Here's to finding your feet with Gwen and avoiding Ainsley's wrath."

"Of which wrath do you speak?"

Ainsley swayed her hips as she approached, more amusement than ire in the sultry pout aimed at Owen. He raised an eyebrow at her. “Doll, don’t pretend like you aren’t terrifying. Jimmy still needs counseling.”

Ainsley sat primly opposite her boyfriend, folding her hands on the table. Rachel followed and slipped into her seat. I exhaled a long, slow breath as Gwen sauntered forward. Her dark jeans and white tank top worshipped her body, her shoulder-length hair loose and messy. Dark makeup lined her green eyes. She was the picture of cool and casual.

She was the only woman I’d ever imagined in my future.

The only one I wanted in my bed now.

Today. This minute.

My calves tightened, my toes contracting, every bone in my body tense and alive. Heat stroked my groin. I gripped my beer, hoping the cold, damp bottle would tame the fire smoking through my veins. I launched her my most charming smile. “Glad you made it back.”

Before she could answer, Ainsley pinned me with her feisty blue eyes. “Ignore the counseling crack. Owen’s just talking about the time I threatened to leave a candiru fish in Jimmy’s toilet bowl. The ones that swim up a urine stream into a guy’s penis and gnaw on its flesh?” She rolled her eyes, as though the comment didn’t send my nuts running for my stomach. “Which is silly, really. It’s nothing like that smallpox virus. You get that sucker, and you don’t have a clue for a week or two, and then *bam*. Pus-filled blisters are everywhere. In your nose and mouth, covering your entire body. And when they rupture?” She shivered dramatically. “You’d be wishing for a fish gnawing on your junk. So like I said to Jimmy, don’t hurt my friend.”

She punctuated the horrifying threat with a grin.

My face felt as green as Jimmy’s looked. “Your girlfriend is terrifying,” I muttered to Owen.

His eyes turned hazy as he stared at her. “She’s one of a kind.”

I might have to reevaluate what horrors I'd walk through to reach Gwen, but the way she was laughing under her breath, a slight shake to her shoulders, it was worth the nauseating visuals.

Jimmy berated Ainsley for ruining his appetite, but he opened a menu anyway, the four of them debating which appetizers we'd share.

I barely listened, couldn't tell you what music played, or how full the bar was. All I saw was Gwen, and the amusement draining from her face. She leaned forward. "Were you trying to hurt me before, saying what you did?"

As much as I believed we needed to speak openly about what had happened, not sweep it under the rug like we'd done for nine years, I regretted the comment. "It just came out."

Her eyes widened. "It just came out?"

I stretched my legs under the table, making contact with her shin. "You're repeating me again."

"Because you're not making sense again. Comments like those don't *just come out*."

No, they didn't. "I wasn't trying to hurt you, Gwen. If I did, I'm sorry. But I'm tired of pretending it didn't happen. It did. It sucked. And I'm ready to move on. Question is, are you?"

She glanced at our friends, who were going out of their way to give us privacy. She slid her attention back at me. "Move on how?"

I could tell her I had every intention of living out my teenage fantasies: Gwen grinding on me, me thrusting into her, slow and deep, my tongue writing songs between her strong thighs. I still had a tour to finish, another album to write, a life in Europe. Gwen's life was a big unknown.

She didn't do social media anymore, my creeping of her over the years unearthing zero intel. I had no clue what she did for a living, or if she'd entertain the notion of traveling with me, but my mind was already there.

To the two of us racing down narrow cobbled streets, stopping to kiss in the rain, laughing as we mangled German translations, feeding each other baguettes and cheese in France.

Jesus. I'd seen Gwen for half a day, and I was fifty steps ahead, practically naming our kids. But that wasn't what she was asking. We were on fragile footing, late winter ice still lingering after a harsh season. "For starters," I said, nudging her leg closer with mine, "I'd be happy to make an agreement."

Her leg didn't move, but her eyebrows did, drawing close together. "You're being mighty cryptic, Cruz."

"Then I'll simplify things for you." I sat straighter, squaring my chest and heart. Hoping she'd judge my honesty. "I'm interested in you, Gwen Frances Hamilton. I miss you and feel like our potential slipped through our fingers, but it's not too late to try and get it back. So I want to move on, with you in my life. As friends, if that's all you can handle. But I'm hoping for more. I'd at least like for us to try, for you to agree to give us a shot." I knocked back a swallow of beer. "Is that clear enough?"

No more games. No more subtle flirting. The only regrets in life were the risks we didn't take, and I was done letting my past undermine my future.

Her throat bobbed, a few slow slides that had me shifting on my seat. A blush stained her nose and cheeks. Had I gone too far? Was she about to bail on me?

But her calf pressed closer to mine. Even through my jeans, awareness splintered through me. Sudden. Fiery. Biting. Like my body was designed to respond to Gwen's alone.

"That's plenty clear, August *Eugene* Cruz." She emphasized the middle name she knew I hated. Just like she hated hers. Way back when, it would have rankled me. Tonight, in the light of our new understanding, it was a gift. "Which leads me to my earlier question."

"You want help learning to pole vault?"

“You seem kind of obsessed with the sport.”

“You have no idea.” My voice sounded so damn thick.

Her deep inhale said she’d be keen to explore those athletics, too. And man, did I want her hand wrapped around my cock, fisting me, pumping me. Almost as much as I ached to watch her fall apart. Unfortunately, I knew which question dogged her.

The one I’d avoided.

The one I still wasn’t sure how to approach.

Her calf slid against mine purposefully. “I have some idea, but the question you sidestepped is if you’d like to wear your Badass PI badge and help me find my father.”

I froze, the cold bottle caught in my death grip.

Deciding to pursue her didn’t ease my guilt over what I’d done, but I couldn’t reverse time. My choices hadn’t been malicious. Still, if Gwen learned I’d stolen her chance to meet her father, intentional or not, she’d shut me out. I could drop clues, lead her to him without admitting what I’d done, but that would hurry things along, limit our time together.

Time was already in short supply.

I’d also reread Mary’s last line, before leaving my hotel. *Remember what I told you on Gwen’s nineteenth birthday.*

Gwen’s mother had shocked me when I’d called her nine years ago, her unexpected revelation leading me to buying Gwen her birthday ring, which had led to our epic disaster. Like this letter was more of the same—Gwen’s mother more involved in her daughter’s life than Gwen had ever realized. I wasn’t sure what that meant. Figuring it out seemed important.

More time I needed.

“Of course I’ll help you find your father,” I said, buying myself more hours.



GWEN

Whenever I'd stand on the edge of a plane door, about to skydive, my heart would pummel my chest, exhilaration and nerves spreading as wind blasted my face. Free. It always made me feel incredibly free.

Like I was a superhero. Invincible. Immortal.

Exactly how sitting across from August felt.

"You're sure?" I asked, unwilling to believe he'd agreed to this nutty adventure. That he'd laid out his heart, asking me to take a chance on us.

"Stop questioning everything I say."

He was asking the impossible. Even after his confession, my courage faltered. He knew I'd crushed on him as a teen, but he had no clue how intense those feelings had been, or that they'd continued long after. I probably still loved him now. Words that would send most men running for the hills. I also hadn't realized how badly I wanted his help finding my father until he'd agreed.

I'd be spending the night with August Cruz, my partner in crime, who really was perusing me like my bikini-clad picture had decorated his teenage wall. I took my fill of him, too: the dark circles under his stunning eyes, his masculine jaw, the way his broad shoulders stretched his T-shirt.

He played the part of brooding singer well. Too well.

Being with him while chasing down clues would be a challenge. Already, I debated dragging him to my apartment instead of into San Francisco's Tenderloin district. August was the best and worst distraction. One I couldn't entertain. I had a birthday wish to fulfill by midnight tomorrow. No matter how slim the chances of that happening, I'd do my best. Which meant waiting out this storm cloud of sexual tension.

First and foremost, August and I had been friends. Best friends. If we were going to explore our undeniable connection, starting here made sense.

And I wanted to start now.

I faced our friends. “You guys okay if we take off? August agreed to help search for my father.”

Rachel spun her wineglass restlessly. “We can come, tackle other leads. Our wine tasting event later isn’t a big one. I’d be happy to cancel.”

“Whatever we can do,” Jimmy added, compassion in his earnest gaze.

Silent communication passed between Owen and Ainsley. “I was supposed to attend a store opening,” he said. “A new place selling my furniture, but I’m cool to bail. Give you whatever help you need.”

Ainsley beamed at her man, but said to me, “We’d love to come.”

A wave of warmth rolled over me. I may not have blood relatives in my life, but I had this crew, people ready to drop their commitments and come to my aid. Owen’s offer in particular touched me. He didn’t know his father, either, and his mother had disappeared from his life. He’d been lucky enough to have a loving grandmother raise him and his brother, but understanding shone in his soft brown eyes.

My throat grew scratchy. For a woman who rarely succumbed to emotion, I was sure getting blubbery today. “You guys are the best, but you have food coming, and I only have one lead so far. More people won’t help.”

Rachel pursed her lips. “Fine, but call if you need us, and we’re hitting the gym tomorrow. Come if you can. If Ainsley signs up for a step class, we can watch her trip and glare at the instructor.”

One of my favorite pastimes, and I’d hate to miss our gym time. I saw Rachel too rarely now, her Napa Valley life making our visits precious. “I’ll do my best. It just might be a shorter session than usual.”

Meeting them early shouldn’t derail my search, and something told me I’d need the girl time.

“Does that mean we’re getting out of here?” August’s leg pulled away from mine. The loss of contact was worse than if I’d found myself marooned in the tundra, cold and alone.

I nodded quickly, wondering if he’d press his hand to my lower back as we left, or walk ahead and not glance back. He did one better. He waited for me to stand and join him, then he threaded our fingers together.

My best friend, the boy I’d loved my entire life, was holding my hand.

Goose bumps erupted up my arms.

Rachel blew me a kiss. “Call if you need me.”

Ainsley copied her move. “What she said.”

“We’re heading on a run in the morning,” Owen told August. “Boys only. We’ll talk about the girls behind their backs. You should come.”

August grinned. “How could I turn that down?”

“I’ll plant a wire on him,” Ainsley fake-whispered to Rachel.

The boys joked about running naked, giving August and me a chance to leave before Ainsley unleashed more of her scary threats.

But I was gone hours ago.

So far gone for August Cruz.

He was a slight step ahead of me. I followed close on his heels until we were outside. We paused, fingers intertwined. He faced me and ran his thumb over the back of my hand. It was a simple brush, but there was nothing simple about touching August.

We both glanced at our clasped hands. My breath faltered. The past few days had been warm for April, the heatwave steaming the evenings, too. Being with August made it steamier. People passed us on the street, a blurred parade of figures. Music drifted from passing cars. Scents of gasoline

and rubber permeated the air, all sensations drifting to the background.

August wound both our arms around my back, pulling me against him. “You look beautiful, Possum.”

His nickname for me pinched my heart. As kids, I’d pretend to sleep sometimes while we’d watch TV, like a deceiving possum playing dead. I’d then bolt upright to scare the living shit out of him. A screeching August was supremely entertaining.

I tilted my head back to look into his eyes, every memory we’d shared reflected in those hazel pools. “I’ve missed that nickname.”

His free hand came to my cheek, knuckles brushing it gently. “I’ve missed you. It was always there, under my skin, in every song, but I didn’t realize how much until today. My heart is fucking racing.”

God, this man. I squeezed our laced palms and unfurled my other over his sternum. Over his heart. Need bellowed in that thundering beat. “You don’t smell like grass.”

He wrinkled his nose. “I used to smell like weed?”

“Like *grass*, dummy. The lawn mowing business.”

He smiled and shook his head lightly. “We can roll around in a park, if you want.” He sucked on his bottom lip while eyeing mine.

Lord have mercy. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“Oh, it’s happening.” He gripped my hand tighter, pulled me closer, brushed his nose against mine. Then he stepped back. “But not here. I’m not wasting our first kiss on a sidewalk, surrounded by people.”

“It’s not our first kiss,” I blurted, pointing out the massive blemish on our history. Making out with August while Finch had dealt with his condom had been the world’s worst first kiss.

*Way to go, Gwen.*

His attentions drifted over my shoulder, tilting up to the cloud-dotted sky. He closed his eyes. Shit. *Shit, shit, shit.* Here we were—touching, flirting, finally on the same page—and I go and mention my WTF.

But a second later, he shrugged a shoulder. “You have a point.”

He leaned down and kissed me softly, a reverent touch that had me rocking on my heels. My belly dipped. We both moaned. Tingles cascaded down my spine.

August’s lips were on mine, where they were meant to be.

Our hands moved and heads tilted, a natural shift that allowed us to open to each other. Open to our past. Accept it. Move on. I clutched the sides of his T-shirt, my fingers curling into the soft fabric. Mine. August was finally, maybe, almost mine.

He cradled my neck, tugged my hair. His breath filled my lungs, sweet and hoppy with the tang of beer. Deeper. Hotter. We were putting on quite the show.

When his tongue skimmed mine, I whimpered.

I’d never whimpered when kissing a man. My skin had never felt like it had shrunk, every inch taut and aware, my clothes and underwear suddenly suffocating. And wet. The damp heat between my thighs engulfed me. He pulled back too soon.

My eyes fluttered open. August came into focus, the street around us reminding me where we were, and of the task ahead of us. Still, I didn’t move. “I’m scared to leave this spot.”

He rested his forehead against mine. “Why?”

“This could be a dream. I could lose you again. I just...I don’t think I can handle that.”

He smoothed my hair and kissed the sensitive skin by my ear. “It’s not a dream, Possum. And if this is one of *your* stupid pranks, I’ll fill your bed with spiders.”

I shivered involuntarily.

“But that was...” His breath skimmed my lips once more.

“Yeah, it was,” I agreed. Everything.

He stared at me a beat longer, then scanned the street. He cleared his throat. “Your car or mine?”

I was about to say, *either as long as we get naked in the backseat*. But such extracurriculars would have to wait. This was Mission Find My Dad, and Badass PI partners didn’t mix business with pleasure. “Let’s meet there, in case we have to split up to chase different leads. It’s an artsy center in the Tenderloin. My mother danced there or something. She referenced a guy who would watch her some days and pick her up.”

Instead of agreeing, he frowned, and my stomach sank. Was he having second thoughts? Was he suddenly overwhelmed? “What is it?”

He toyed with my fingers, dragging his thumb over my cuticles in seductive half-moons. “Nothing. I’ll follow you.”

After pointing out our cars, we separated slowly, walking backward, our hands the last things to part. Again, a cold desolation gripped me. I almost changed my plan and dragged him to my car, but that was the crazy talking. *Daffy as a duck*. When my heel cranked into a lamppost, I finally turned and hurried to my Impreza.



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6:30 P.M.

29 ½ HOURS...



GWEN

My driving skills on the way to the TASC center were an embarrassment. I cut off two cars, nearly plowed over a man, and I drove so slowly at one point, honking blared for five seconds.

All I could picture was losing August, his rental car disappearing from sight, him disappearing from my life. I could win that show: *America's Worst Driver*.

In one of America's seediest districts.

The Tenderloin had a smell about it, eau de vomit mixed with rotting garbage and a skunkiness all its own. Weed mixed with gasoline. The homeless community owned the sidewalks, sleeping and loitering twenty-four/seven. Random shouts competed with grinding brakes, and this was an improvement from decades ago.

Again, I tried picturing my mother venturing here, blouse buttoned to her chin, gray-streaked hair close cropped. Pointed nose. Thin lips. *Severe*. That was the word that best described her, in looks and personality.

Yet her younger self had spent time in the Tenderloin.

I dodged crumpled garbage on the cigarette-littered street, stopping once to drop a bill into a woman's panhandling cup. San Francisco's homeless problem was always upsetting. The

number of displaced people here threatened to flood my already overwrought heart.

They were also intimidating, especially the man swerving toward me, who smelled like he'd bathed in whiskey. "Gimme some sugar, hot cakes."

August appeared at my side and wrapped a protective arm around my shoulder. "She's only serving sugar to me," he said, curt, leading me toward the rec center. His handsome profile was a granite mask.

When he escorted me safely up the stone steps and inside the front doors, I kissed his smooth cheek. I still couldn't believe I could kiss his cheek, smooth or otherwise. "My Prince Charming."

He kept me tucked into his side. "Please don't come here alone."

"Are you feeling protective?"

"I'm feeling like I want to cut out that man's tongue and feed it to him after marinating it in E. coli."

"I think Ainsley rubbed off on you."

He shivered. "I'd prefer to remain on her good side. We should also find you a parka to wear, keep leering men away."

I glanced at my white tank top, tight but not showing excessive cleavage. "This isn't exactly skimpy, and I could have handled myself on the street."

He backed me against the hallway wall and planted one hand on the plaster by my head. His pupils blew wide. "Do you know how gorgeous you are? I swear to God, Gwen—I can barely focus around you. It was always like this, like I couldn't think about anything but you when we were together. All I could do was write songs. You just exude this strength and confidence, even back when you thought you weren't worthy. More so now. And there's nothing sexier than a woman who can handle her own, but I do *not* want you handling yourself with sloppy men who have no issues taking without asking."

A piano's harmonics drifted toward us, each struck key mimicking my sharp pulse. I flattened my palms on his firm chest and almost whimpered again. "I used to distract you?"

He chuckled, a low devious sound. "Oh, honey, you have no idea."

"I want an idea." I wanted all of his ideas, every thought he'd ever had. I wanted to collect them. My secret jar of hearts. And *honey*? Sign me up for that endearment.

"We'll discuss my ideas during your pole vaulting lesson," he said.

I inched my leg between his, until my hip made contact with his groin. "Will these lessons involve show and tell?"

He rotated his hips, enough for me to appreciate the solid bulge behind his zipper. "Since you sucked at school, I thought visuals would help."

A PowerPoint presentation would be appreciated. "Says the guy who dropped out of college and made a sport out of shooting green Jell-O from his nose. And I worked hard for my degree, thank you very much. I also rock at my job."

Although I was teasing him, his faced sobered. He created space between us. "What do you do for work?"

Right. He didn't know. I may have followed (stalked) his career, but I didn't have a Facebook page. I'd avoided social media since my catastrophic WTF. He wouldn't know defining details of my life. No details at all, really.

His arms hung limp at his sides. Instinctively, I wrapped mine around my waist. "I work at an adoption agency, placing babies in homes."

"Wow." He jolted slightly, his voice low and heavy. "That's amazing. Do you love it?"

Even talking about it had me grinning. "I never expected to find a career that fulfilled me like this, but it's so rewarding. As painful as those student loans and school headaches were, it was worth it. I found my purpose." To give kids loving families and the childhood I never had.

He was frowning again, like my success upset him. “I’m happy for you,” he said, no happiness in his flat tone.

A chill descended between us. It was easy to get carried away with this newness, kissing in the street, flirting, but this awkward interlude was a reminder how little we knew about each other. It was also easy for him to say he could forgive me and move on from our past. Actions spoke louder than words, and his body language screamed *wary*.

I should take his lead and focus on finding my father, not on pole vaulting and August Cruz. Although pole vaulting with August Cruz was a notion I could get behind. Or in front of. Or underneath.

Instead I pulled my Badass PI badge from my purse. “Tonight I’m not an adoption agent. Tonight we’re private investigators hot on a trail.”

He latched onto my attempt at levity and dug his badge from his jeans pocket. He held it up between two fingers. “I take my PI work seriously.”

“Want me to sew it on your shirt?”

“I doubt you have a needle and thread in that tiny purse, and I’ve seen you sew, Gwen. You’d likely pierce my nipple.”

He was referring to the stuffed monkey I’d made in eighth grade, otherwise known as Mutant Monkey.

I maneuvered my Coach shoulder bag, the compact stunner a donation from Ainsley’s collection. Fancy yet functional. I pulled out a mini sewing kit. “For emergencies.”

PI badge wedged between his fingers, he covered his nipples with both palms. “You’re not coming near me with that.”

“Jimmy has piercings. All the cool kids are doing it.”

He mock-snarled. “Unless you want to wake up with a tarantula in your bed, I suggest you back away.”

I gave him my best sleazy eyes. “Just one poke. It’ll feel so good.”

He hissed in a sharp breath, my unspoken *that's what she said* joke hitting its mark. A mark I should avoid. This addictive flirting was getting away from me again. Being with him was too intoxicating, too novel. I couldn't rein myself in.

August, however, said, "I'll pass," and averted his eyes. He shoved his badge back in his pocket and studied the hallway, newfound stiffness in his stance.

So much for my levity.

Ignoring my growing discomfort, I followed his lead and read the community posters on the scuffed-up walls. Each advertisement listed classes, from poetry tutorials to tai chi. Piano still echoed from somewhere, stopping and starting, along with a commanding female voice. Up a set of stairs was a glass case that held photos and pottery.

Pretending August's distracted state wasn't distracting me, I pushed past him, led by the sporadic music, but the glass case drew my focus. Most stored photos were yellowed, filled with legwarmer-clad girls and mullet-haired boys. Eighties and nineties styles. Some looked even older, bell bottoms and peace symbols dating them. I wondered for the millionth how teenage Mary Hamilton had hung out in a place like this.

I abruptly muted that thought. She wasn't why I was here. She was a lead and nothing more, a path that could end at my father's door.

I scanned the faces in each photo, searching for her. If she was in here, he might be as well. One showed actors in a low-budget play, another framed a handsome man playing guitar, which reminded me of the silent presence at my back. I stayed focused on the photos, assessing if any men had one eye slightly rounder than the other or a freckled lip. Not that my attributes were necessarily DNA linked, but I was working with limited resources.

Next was a picture of three girls doing a jazz lunge, arms wide, legwarmers on, hair flying as though they'd finished a wild spin. My eyes skimmed past the photo but snapped back.

Two girls looked familiar, the middle one in particular. The one with the wide smile and bright eyes. Holy shit. “That’s my mother...and I think my aunt.”

August moved to my side and bent forward to study the picture that had me gawking. “You sure?”

The smile—no, my mother’s joyous *glow*—wasn’t familiar, but her narrow features and long face were unmistakable. My aunt was less recognizable. I’d never met her, but I’d found a few photos when packing my mother’s belongings. They resembled each other, my Aunt Sarah only a year younger than my mother. A recluse who’d moved to the East Coast.

Aunt Sarah used to send me a yearly birthday card. The only family member who’d gone out of her way to show she cared. One card a year for eleven years. Until my mother had gotten into a fight with her.

I’d overheard a phone conversation shortly after receiving her last card. Just the end, but it had been enough: Mary hissing into the phone, telling her sister not to call again. That as far as she was concerned she was an only child. The birthday cards had ceased after that. I hadn’t realized how much they’d meant to me until they’d stopped.

It was likely another reason I hadn’t felt I’d deserved August’s friendship. No one had stuck around in my life, not my aunt or my grandparents. I’d believed I hadn’t been worth loving.

I couldn’t be sure it was Aunt Sarah in the photo, but the resemblance between the two girls was too distinct to ignore.

“I’m pretty sure it’s them.” I nearly plastered my face against the glass.

“Your mother looks so happy,” he said quietly, as though to himself. Then louder, “How did a woman who danced and listened to Depeche Mode become cold and rigid?”

He took the words right out of my mouth. His arm brushing mine stole the breath from my lungs. I wanted to slide my arm under his, link our elbows, but he still seemed

distant. Dissecting his strange vibes was as appealing as analyzing Mary Hamilton's descent into Frost Queen.

I scanned the case for other photos of her, unsuccessfully. "This confirms she danced here, at least. Probably often. They wouldn't have immortalized her picture if it had been just a few times." I straightened and glanced down the narrow hall. The piano had stopped. Young girls filed from a room, ballet slippers on their feet. Parents waited on a couple benches. "It's time to do some recon."

I marched toward the classroom, August following. Chatter from excited girls echoed off the ceiling. A boy left the room in tights, twirling toward his father, who clapped and beamed. The warmth filling the hall was a contrast to the Tenderloin's filth and stench outside. Flowers blooming in a barren field. We waited for the kids to leave.

August stayed quiet, hands shoved in his pockets. He leaned on the wall, away from me.

I chewed my cheek.

An older woman sporting a prim bun exited last, her slender frame accentuated in her leotard, pink tights, and black skirt. She was pushing seventy with a body a thirty-year-old would covet. I glanced at August, unsure how to approach her.

As teens, he and I would perform different roles when investigating. He'd use his smarts to lead us to potential suspects, and I'd play the part of school reporter or Navy SEAL or international spy. Tonight he hung back, broody stance in place, letting me lead the way. Considering our strange reunion, it shouldn't be surprising, but I wasn't sure what role to play.

Unwilling to let the moment slip by, I stepped into the ballet instructor's path. "Sorry to bother you, but I'm trying to find information on a girl who took dance classes in the late eighties. Have you worked here long?"

She studied August, a slow perusal that had me wanting to send out a cougar alert. To me, she said, "I've been here since

the center opened, but I'm in a rush. Come back next week, same time, and I can answer your questions."

Nope. No way. A week wouldn't cut it. That suitcase didn't land in my lap the day before my birthday only for my search to lose steam now. I motioned to August. "My friend here isn't feeling well. I told him not to order the refried beans, but he's stubborn as a mule and can't resist them. If he doesn't find a bathroom soon, well...it might get ugly. If you don't mind showing us the way, I can ask you a few questions as we walk?"

Her next glance at August was less cougar and more repelled. I bit my tongue to keep from cackling. He cradled his stomach and winced, playing along, but there was no missing how his lips compressed and the veins in his neck strained against his skin. He didn't like his given role. It made me enjoy it even more.

She huffed out a breath. "Follow me, then. Whoever built this space didn't have a clue how often kids need bathroom breaks."

She strutted ahead, feet slightly turned out, her perfect posture envy inducing. August shot me dirty looks, hand still pressed to his stomach. I winked and mouthed, *Suck it up*, then hurried to keep up with the ballerina.

"Do you have ledgers here?" I asked, trying to match her elegant stride. "Lists of who took classes back then?"

A prim huff escaped her. "That would imply a level of organization."

Disappointment deflated my posture, but I didn't let up. "There's a photo in the glass case, near the entrance—one of three girls doing a jazz slide or something. Do you know which one I mean?"

She took a sharp right down another hall, arms swinging, shoulders back. "Those would be the Sunshine Girls."

"Sunshine Girls?"

She stopped abruptly and pointed to two doors in an alcove. "Bathroom is there."

August, never breaking character, offered a pained smile. I muffled my laugh with a cough.

The ballerina cocked her head at him, another long perusal taking him in from head to toe. “You’re August Cruz.”

He froze mid-step toward the bathroom. I tried to keep my eyeballs from popping out of my head.

Still hamming up his upset-stomach performance, he winced but nodded. “I am.”

She planted her hands on her slim hips and shook her head. “Well, I never... I’m a fan, of your early work in particular. ‘Girl with the Black Heart’ played on repeat in my home during an unpleasant divorce.”

Of course August met a music fan while pretending to have the shits. *Of course* she mentioned the song that immortalized my WTF.

But the fan part was the bigger deal, his successful life coming into focus. He’d always be the boy who’d pluck on his guitar strings, his tongue poking out of his mouth in concentration, but this interaction was a reminder how far he’d come.

He was an immense talent, revered around the globe. Not a limelight-bathed superstar chased by paparazzi. More like an undercover celebrity only recognized by true fans. A musician who lived out of a suitcase while touring. I wasn’t sure where’d I’d fit into that life with him. *If I’d fit in.*

The ballerina glanced at the bathroom door, and her wrinkled cheeks colored. “Look at me, keeping you from relieving yourself. Go on, then.”

He shot me another glare. Hopefully she read the aggravated scowl as *pained*. “If you stay here a minute,” he said through gritted teeth, “I can autograph something for you when I’m out.”

Embarrassed or not, he was thinking ahead, giving me more time with our mark.

She tipped her head. “Consider it done.”

He escaped into the bathroom.

She turned to me. “The Sunshine Girls were three girls who danced here a few times a week, often on their own. Two sisters and one friend. They would light up a room, hence the name. Real free spirits. They always drew a crowd.”

Those visuals rocked me as much as August being recognized, but the confirmation of my aunt’s identity had me frowning. I’d assumed my mother and her sister’s relationship had always been tumultuous, one easy to toss away. If they’d been close enough to dance and rehearse together, how had they wound up so estranged my mother had cut her sister off? She’d even refused to contact Aunt Sarah when she’d gotten sick, and I couldn’t find a number to let my aunt know her sister had passed.

If I had to guess, it was likely my mother’s “sunny” personality that had led to their falling out, whatever the reason. Not that it mattered now. All that mattered was finding my father. “Mary Hamilton was the middle girl in the photo,” I told the ballerina. “She was also my mother.”

She clasped her hands in front of her waist. “Was?” I nodded, and she clucked her tongue. “I’m sorry, dear. I remember her being quite the clown, always laughing with her friends. She brought a lot of life to this place.”

Forget being rocked. That information was like being shoved, elbowed, and kicked in the gut. My mother’s dislike for me hadn’t been a secret. She’d barely glance at my school work, regardless of my prodding. She’d eat her dinner early some nights and leave me at the table alone. She’d never once called me after I’d moved out. The only reason we’d ever seen each other was because I’d initiated contact.

Her lack of affection and sharp words hadn’t needed deciphering. Her disdain for me and her life had been crystal clear. But if she’d been such a clown, *a bright light in this place*, it meant I really *had* been the thing that drained the music from her world. The big change in her life.

Questions flooded my mind. “What do you mean by clown, exactly? Like what did she—” Abruptly, I censored my

tongue. Asking about the Mary *before* would only result in another harsh blow. Nothing learned now would undo her harsh parenting. Best to stick to my interrogation. “Sorry. What I’m actually after is information about a boy who watched her dance.”

“Many boys watched those girls. Drew them like bees to honey.”

Mary Hamilton, the Male Magnet. Another impossible fact. The ballerina checked her watch and tightened her lips. A bathroom toilet flushed. Time wasn’t on my side.

“This guy picked her up some days,” I added quickly. “Waited for her to finish.”

She studied the ceiling while pointing and flexing her foot. “Sorry, but that’s all I know. You could try speaking with Mr. Hawton. He’s the only other instructor left from back then. He’s away for a month, but should return toward the middle of May.”

August emerged, ending my interrogation. Not that it mattered. I may have learned my mother had been a silly clown who’d lightened rooms and had seduced men, but this lead had dried up.

Adorning his rock star persona, August escorted his fan to the exit. She fawned over his music and the song about him dousing me—*my shadow*—in gasoline. Always a good time. After having her purse signed and cheeks kissed by her crush, Loretta Walsh, as we’d come to know her, left the center a happy lady.

August, however, glared at me from inside the exit. “A bad stomach? I just *love* my refried beans?”

I swirled my hand in a dramatic flourish. “I was in character.”

“And now rumors will spread that I get the shits.”

I didn’t even try to curb my snickering. “Everyone uses the bathroom and puts their pants on one leg at a time. You’re no different, Mr. Rock God.”

A sweet blush highlighted his cheekbones. He dropped his gaze and rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m no rock god. I just play music.”

His modesty had my heart tripping over itself. “Don’t downplay what you do.” When he didn’t reply, I said, “I lied, by the way—at my mother’s house. I listen to your music all the time. It’s brilliant.”

He glanced at me through his thick lashes. One beat dragged into two. “Thank you,” he said softly.

Forget tripping. My heart freefell, taking my belly with it. And my IQ. It was nice to be joking with him again, talking about real things, even as my wits scattered, but his earlier reserve lingered. He hadn’t moved to touch my back or hold my hand.

When with my friends, I never hesitated calling them on their bullshit. I believed in laying your cards on the table, being honest with those in your life. After my WTF, I’d realized too late how vital it was to be honest with *yourself*. Yet here I was, since August had parachuted into my life, hemming and hawing, thinking more than speaking. Keeping the depths of my thoughts on mute.

“We should take off,” I said. “Before someone breaks into our cars.” Not the thing I should have said. It was the easy thing. The *don’t get hurt* thing. “We’ll need to read more of my mother’s diary, search for more clues.”

He cast a dark glance at the street beyond the exit. “Best to meet somewhere else, a bar or something that doesn’t come with men who want your sugar.”

Heading to our separate vehicles meant another round of erratic driving. I was bound to lose my license before I officially lost my mind. “Maybe we should pare down to one car? We can meet at my apartment. Go through the diary there, then stick together after.”

His eyes dropped to my chest, then skimmed up to my neck and face, lower again to my breasts and hips. The zig-zagged pattern tied me into knots. “Sure,” he said.

I looked back in the direction of the glass case, where my mother's photo was tucked inside. A strange pressure cramped my lungs, as though fresh oxygen lay that way. Answers. Stones I had yet to turn. But there were no more clues leading to my father. Nothing here would help me find him.

August placed his arm around me as we pushed outside, shielding me with his body. A silly effort. Although a few panhandlers called out for cash, no one paid us much attention. Not that I minded leaning into his side. We arrived at my car too soon.

I gave him my address, and he followed me home and up the stairs to my apartment. I put my key in the lock like I had a thousand times before. I opened my door by rote, but I didn't enter the space.

Not with August behind me, ready to enter as well.

My place looked stark from this angle, my surfboard and mountain bike hidden from view. All that lay ahead were empty slate walls, an *Outside* magazine splayed on the kitchen counter, a shopping list stuck to the fridge. August was about to walk into my home, my life, and learn things about me. Discover the woman I'd become. What struck me harder, though, the blow that had me frozen in place, was that he hadn't fully known me all those years ago, either. Not really.

He'd seen what I'd let him see. He'd heard what I'd chosen to say, never fully speaking my heart. Even when tipsy and texting on my nineteenth birthday, I'd diluted the truth, hinting at an older crush, not admitting I'd still loved him irrevocably.

I had no clue how long he was in town, if our lives could converge, or if this was a wild waystation we'd been stranded on. He'd made the first step, at the restaurant, blurting our history to our friends. It was my turn to offer some blunt honesty, share the extent of my feelings for him back then: hiding from them had never served me in the past.

All he had to do was open my closet door and see the August Cruz poster tacked inside. Proof my feelings hadn't diluted much. (Note to self: remove at first opportunity.)

“Gwen?” His hesitant voice was close, just behind me.

Gathering the strength that served me when powering through an insane workout, when I was sure my lungs would give out and my legs would buckle, I turned to my former best friend, and said, “I loved you.”



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7:00 P.M.

29 HOURS...



## AUGUST

My abs flexed, like her words had struck my gut. Adrenaline spiked my heart rate. It took three rough breaths to compute what tense she'd used.

*Loved* not love. Past not present.

Even worse was the heavy disappointment that crushed me at the realization.

She clutched her mother's diary in one hand, her keys in the other. I didn't cup her cheeks the way I ached to, or pull her into my arms. I kept picturing her face when she'd spoken about her job, how much she loved it. How she'd found her life's purpose. A life that didn't include traipsing around Europe with a touring musician.

But, man, the rawness in her voice. "When?"

A sad sigh slipped past her lips. "I don't know. For as long as I can remember. Like, as kids, being around you made it hurt to breathe. During high school it got worse, especially at the end. And that shitty, lonely year after. Not just because of the lonely part, me building it up in my head."

She tossed her keys and purse and diary on the floor behind her. Like she was angry. "I'm not talking about a teenage crush here, August. This was bone-deep love. And I was sure you didn't feel the same. I thought you pitied me. Or it was my own lame excuse to push you away. I pushed

everyone away. It's what I did. Sorry. God." She covered her face with her hands. "I'm not making sense."

But she *did* make sense. Too much sense.

Hand jammed into my pocket, I flipped my guitar pick over. Her texts nine years ago had hinted at the intensity of her feelings. That *Zap* she inspired had leapt from my phone the second I'd seen her name. This morning, at her mother's, the way she'd spoken and the heat in her eyes had said all she hadn't. My instant connection to her had been just as strong.

It had never faded. Not fully.

I'd tried to make sense of this Gwen habit over the years, how I'd pull that zoo picture up on my computer, stare at her, miss her. An addiction I could never kick. Each wallow session ended in sad songs sung. So, yeah...I understood what it was to feel like the marrow had been sucked from your bones, the hollowness that lingered. Nine years of emptiness. Nearly eleven if her previous silent treatment counted.

I also recognized the way she was breathing harder now, eyes round and wide. Filled with doubt and longing—hope that this second chance would stick.

I stepped toward her, a fraction closer. She had loved me. *She loves me*, my body and soul taunted. Whatever the tense, her truth had me addled. It was why I'd backed away from her earlier. This was not a woman I could casually *fuck*. That kiss in the street had resounded through me, like a tuning fork had vibrated through my blood.

This was a woman meant to be worshipped, strummed, discovered, *possessed*.

And she had a life here she loved. Friends. A great job. Not to mention I was helping her track down a deceased man.

Letting this go any further would be irresponsible. That didn't stop my honesty from matching hers. "I loved you, too. I realized it when I started resenting Finch hanging around us. I hated him making you laugh, hated you wrestling with him or running through the sprinklers together. I wanted you to

myself, but I also knew I was all you really had. That thought scared the crap out of me.”

Her hand floated up to her neck. “Why?”

“If we didn’t work, where would that have left you? With friends like Kayla who only ever wanted to social climb? Feed you false information, so she could make her move on me?” I shook my head. “I couldn’t risk it.”

“You knew Kayla did that?”

“Not until much later. The night I broke up with her, when...everything went down, she didn’t walk away easily. She badgered me awhile, and when she figured out something happened with you, she told me you hated being my charity case. That what we had hadn’t been real. She framed it in a catty way to make you look bad, but it was easy to read between the lines, that she’d turned those tables on you, too. At the time, it was more shit heaped onto a shit pile. But I know you, Gwen. I understand how your mother beat you down. How one word from someone like Kayla would infect you.”

Her spine went rigid. “My mother never hit me. I would have told you.”

“Emotional abuse is just as bad.”

She winced, and it crushed me. I’d walked in once, unannounced, to overhear Mary Hamilton call her only child worthless. Stupid. The word *disgusted* had been used. Always in that acrid tone, like Gwen was lice stuck in her hair.

“Thing is,” I shut the door and inched forward, walking until we were in her kitchen, her back pressed to her island countertop, “you never covered when she laced into you. You would lift your chin and take it. Stand taller. I never pitied you, Gwen. I was *amazed* by you.”

She tilted her head to meet my eyes. Disbelief shone. “Really?”

“Oh, honey. I was in awe of you.” I planted my hands on either side of her, caging her body against the counter. The space between us swelled with nine years of bridled heat.

“But you don’t know me now,” she said, her voice breathless. “I also wasn’t fully honest with you earlier, when you asked why I slept with Finch.”

My grip on the counter stiffened. “What do you mean?”

“You asked if I did it to hurt you, and I think part of me did. Aside from being sad and lonely, and wishing Finch was you, I was devastated when I saw that stupid picture of Kayla. I was angry and knew sleeping with Finch would hurt you. I knew, and I did it. I wanted you to feel my pain.” She finally touched me, her hands branding my chest. “I’m sorry. It was so wrong.”

My first instinct was to wrench away from her and pace an angry line, but to what end? Feed the demons that had chased me these long years? Try to surgically remove this woman who lived under my skin? I’d only cut myself. “I understand,” I offered instead.

But she curved forward, her shoulders sloping in dismay.

“Look at me, Gwen.” When she lifted her head, I held her chin between my fingers. “You loved me. I loved you. We should have done something about it, but we didn’t. We hurt each other instead. But what I see in front of me now is a fresh start with the only person who knows I love *Gilmore Girls* and who spreads rumors I get the shits from eating beans.”

That earned me a smile. “I should run your fan club.”

She should be the goddamn president. I erased the inches separating us, pressed my hips into hers. My dick lengthened, got hot and heavy. She mewled at the contact, her hands snaking around my waist. She pulled me into her.

Lust blasted up my thighs. “Please tell me you want this, too. Because being with you is killing me. I’ve never wanted anything so badly as I want you right now. You have no idea.”

She latched her leg around mine and rolled her hips. “Then stop talking and start kissing.”

I slammed my mouth onto hers. There was no holding back the years I’d fought our pull, the eternity I’d dreamed of sinking into Gwen. My thrusts rocked her into the sharp

counter, my lips working hers open. She let me in, sucked on my tongue, my bottom lip. I palmed her ass and pressed into her.

Her aggression rivaled mine. She pushed back so hard I lost my grip on the counter and tumbled to the floor, taking her with me. Because I wouldn't let her go. Not now. Maybe never. Fuck, I had Gwen Hamilton in my arms, under me, on her apartment floor. Abruptly, I shoved my hand up her shirt. She gasped. My knuckles skimmed her taut stomach until her breast was in my greedy grasp. Her bra was lacy, her nipples hard buds beneath. My cock throbbed with each squeeze of my palm.

Gripping my hair in unforgiving fists, she rutted against me and sucked on my neck, her jeans abrading mine so wildly sparks were sure to light. I thrust harder; she cried out. We were dry-fucking like a couple desperate teens.

“Jesus, Gwen. I can't last like this. I need you so fucking bad.”

“If I don't fuck you in the next three seconds, I'll die.”

“Don't you dare.”

“Then get to work.”

A command I'd happily follow. She pushed up my shirt and yanked at my belt buckle. I made quick work of dragging off her jeans, but mine only made it to my knees. My hand was in her underwear, the slick heat of her obliterating me. “You're so wet.”

She writhed beneath me and cupped me over my briefs. “That's all for you.”

A gift I'd never have dared wished for. The pressure of her hand on my cock, rubbing brazenly, had my eyes rolling to the back of my head. She pulled at my waistband, so hard she trapped my hips against hers. I eased her back. “Easy, sweetheart. I need space to get them off. And we need a condom.”

“No.” She stilled beneath me, both of us breathing hard. “I'm on the pill. Are you clean?”

*Christ.* Bare and balls deep in Gwen Hamilton? Fresh fire leapt up my thighs. “I’m careful and I get tested.”

“Me too.”

And I was about to lose my load.

My ass flexed as we shoved my briefs down, my cumbersome clothing hooked around my knees. Her tank top was shoved above her bra. My shirt was still on, too, hiked high enough that our abdomens touched. Warm skin on warm skin. Gwen’s skin against mine. Sweet anticipation spiraled through me, and the instant her hand circled my rigid flesh, I bucked. It wasn’t pretty. It was instinct. Her hot palm played me, my hard length singing in response. I’d never been burned up by desire. Not like this, riled and flushed with wanting.

The hard floor didn’t matter. We could be locked in a prison cell for all I cared. All that mattered was her willing body under mine, my best friend about to become so much more.

I kissed her neck, sucked on her ear. She guided me to her entrance, a firm grip that didn’t waver. I should have slowed down, eased into her, but the second I felt her cleft, the very center of her, I thrust in. “Gwen, fuck. Oh, fuck.” *My Gwen.*

The words tore from my throat. Her name resonated in my chest, ringing with rightness.

She clawed my ass. “August, God. How do you feel this good?”

“I’m so hard, baby. So hard inside you.”

Her inner walls clenched, sucking me deeper. I spasmed at the hot tug. I didn’t slow. I couldn’t. Hard, fast strokes followed. Skin slapping. My forearms and knees dug into the hardwood floor, Gwen’s body caged below me. We locked eyes, our mouths open but not touching. We traded grunts and pants, but the intensity didn’t allow for kissing.

There was also a hint of anger in each snap of my hips. Uncensored bitterness for what she’d done, her one senseless act stealing almost a decade from us. But it played like a dead

note, a muffled guitar string that enhanced the backbeat. Made it what it was. This was our time.

Now, not then. Anger and all.

It whipped through me, coupled with the way Gwen's eyes shone with tears, our lips still brushing but not connecting, her knees drilled into my sides.

Anyone else, and what we were doing would be fucking. Not with Gwen. This was making love to the woman I'd dreamed of most of my life.

Real, raw, wild.

"August." She panted my name. "I'm so close."

We clutched each other like this was the only moment we'd ever have.

"I'm gonna explode the second you let go." I slammed harder into her, nearly winding myself.

"Oh, wow. Yeah. That. Don't stop *that*."

I growled my approval, loved her asking for what she needed. I was on a thin wire, my thighs screaming for release, my balls drawing up tight. When she called my name again, it soared with a sharp cry, her pussy clamping on me so tightly my release detonated—a fast, hot surge that blasted down my spine. It lasted an eternity, each convulsion blinding.

I kissed her then, finally, pressing my cock deeper inside her, fucking her mouth with my tongue as the waves lessened. Her tears stuck to my cheeks. I kissed her eyelids, the underside of her jaw. Worked my way back to her perfect mouth.

I couldn't get enough.

I also had to tread carefully.

Explaining I'd ruined her opportunity to meet her father could mean this would never happen again. It could wreck our fresh start. There was nothing to be done at this point, no bringing the man back, but I could be with her on this journey, support her when she found out. Maybe we'd learn more about

him during the process. If I told her the truth now, she'd stop following the clues. She'd push me away.

Both outcomes unacceptable.

I rotated my hips, still high on the heaven of her. "My knees are skinned."

She laughed and wrapped her arms and legs around me. "My ass is bruised."

"What a glorious ass it is."

"You didn't even see it."

"I squeezed it. And I plan to see it shortly."

She clasped me closer. "That just happened."

I rubbed my nose up her ear. "It did. And it better happen again."

"Don't pull out yet."

Her heart raced, a rapid percussion against my chest. Pounding with anxiety? "I'm not going anywhere, Possum."

Except that wasn't true. Another unpleasant reality. I had to get on a plane in less than two days.



GWEN

I trailed my nails down August's scalp, and he sighed. When I clenched my core, a delicious rumble moved through his chest. Little things. New things. Precious discoveries I wanted to hoard.

He pressed soft kisses all over my face. "Stay here. I'll get a cloth to clean you up."

I flinched as he pulled out, the emptiness instant, but when he tripped kicking off his jeans and briefs, we both laughed; the silly intimacy of it filled me back up. The way he reached

behind him and yanked off his T-shirt had my laugh trembling into a moan.

He smirked over his shoulder. “Like what you see?”

“Love it.” The defined muscles of his back. The divots at the base of his spine. How his toned ass flexed with each move. “Bathroom is down the hall to your left.” I watched him in all his naked glory until he disappeared. I tilted my hips to keep his release from spilling farther down my thighs, and the wackiest of wacky thoughts blindsided me: *I wish I wasn't on the pill.*

I pressed my hands to my flat belly and almost keened. The urge to have a permanent reminder of what we'd shared ripped through me. A piece of August mixed with a piece of me. Forever. If he could read my mind, he'd probably bolt so fast the air would spin.

I focused instead on the tenderness between my thighs.

That had been life-altering sex. Moving with him, staring into his eyes while he pumped into me hadn't been like I'd imagined. And I'd imagined it a lot. This had been more intense than expected, deeper. Like we'd never lost our connection.

Or maybe the intensity was because we *had* lost it. The anger, the regrets—they'd fueled our flames. And what flames they'd been. Unfortunately, flames too often left scars...and unhealthy baby-making thoughts.

While waiting for him, I removed my bra and tank top. I lay on my hard floor, naked and exposed. Instinctively I knew nothing in my life would be the same. *I wasn't* the same. I closed my eyes, pressed my fingers against my breastbone, tried to tame my rattling pulse. Heat pricked my neck.

“Gwen, honey?” I opened my eyes. August knelt beside me and ran a warm washcloth up my inner thighs. “You okay?” He worked as he talked, tenderly moving the cloth over my sensitive flesh, and I melted. He was buck as naked got, on his knees, taking care of me. I was a puddle of happiness. I was petrified.

“I don’t think I’m okay.”

He frowned and tossed the cloth behind him. Leaning on his elbow, he pressed to my side, his legs stretched next to mine. With his free hand, he traced dizzying patterns on my abdomen and breasts. “Talk to me.”

“You’re going to leave. Go back to Europe, aren’t you?”

His fingers faltered. He flattened his palm on my ribs, below the curve of my breast. “I am. But—”

“When?”

His answer took too long. He swallowed one too many times. “Two days. Early Monday morning.”

If this was how getting punched in the gut felt, I’d leave boxing out of my workout regime. I curled away from him, stood and gathered my clothes, blinking the burn from my eyes. My throat stung. My belly churned. How would I say goodbye to him?

“Gwen.”

I kept moving, kept breathing, kept blinking.

“Gwen.” When I didn’t answer him a second time, he wrapped his arms around me from behind, stilling my frenetic movements. “Don’t you dare do that. Don’t you dare cut me off again. Not after tonight.”

He cocooned his naked body around mine, forced me to drop my clothes. He spun me around and locked me in his arms. “That was the best sex of my life. It’s the beginning, not the end. We have another day and a half together, and I plan to spend every second of that time with you.”

“Aren’t you scared?”

He sputtered out a laugh. “Are you serious? I’m fucking terrified.”

“How do we do this?”

“Easy.” He loosened his hold on me, stroked my back. “We take this one second at a time, while I figure out the rest. I don’t want you thinking about anything but each moment,

because right now I have a beautiful, naked woman in my arms, but she's frowning. These are not things that should coexist."

A small smile escaped me. "One second at a time?" It seemed impossible.

"Make each one count. Leave the rest to me."

I couldn't pick up and leave my job. I didn't want to. He had no clue the life I'd created for myself here, in San Francisco. The years and determination it had taken. Yet the prospect of losing this amazing man in two days—*one and a half*—had spots clouding my vision. I wasn't sure I could compartmentalize my emotions, give him what he wanted. All I could do was try.

My rigid posture thawed slightly. I nuzzled my face into his neck. "Every second."

He wove one hand into my hair and sighed. "Every second, Possum."

When he thickened against me, I extricated myself from his hold. "But no more bikini posters now."

"Bikini posters?"

Ainsley's ridiculous comment about him staring at me like my scantily clad poster had adorned his teenage wall wormed into my mind. I motioned to his gorgeous cock, half-stiff and flushed at the tip. "Sex. No sex right now."

He squinted. "Bikini posters means sex?"

"Just go with it."

He mumbled something like "Girls are weird," but his eyelids lowered and he stroked his length once, roughly. "But there will be bikini posters later, right?"

His searing glance had tingles erupting across my skin. "Definitely later. For now we need to go through my mother's journal and search for more clues." I needed to regroup. Find my feet. Reorder my upside-down world by putting on some clothes and creating emotional armor.



## AUGUST

After a quick snack of cheese and fruit, Gwen and I relocated to her plaid couch, her mother's diary and an awkward silence between us. It wasn't okay. I wasn't okay. My Monday morning flight meant we only had a day and a bit. The timeline was akin to torture. We hadn't mentioned my departure date again. We hadn't said much of anything. The prospect had new lyrics looping through my mind: *cruel fate, wicked ways, oceans apart*.

I had commitments in Germany and France, unbreakable contracts, weeks and months scheduled on the road. But this wasn't the beginning of the end. I wouldn't let it be. I simply had to make a plan and figure things out. Think long-term.

Still, she was freaking out, shutting down in increments.

Which meant beginning with the small stuff, here and now, was important. Making use of all our seconds. "When did you start surfing?" I needed to learn everything I could about Gwen Hamilton.

She glanced up from the worn journal. "Sorry?"

I nodded to the board taking up the opposite wall. "Surfing, I don't remember you wanting to try it." Or skydiving. Or mountain biking. Gwen had always been athletic, running track and acing gym class, but she'd never been an adrenaline junkie.

Keeping the journal open, she leaned her shoulder into the couch. "During college, my third summer off, I was bartending at night but needed as much cash as possible. A daytime job renting surfboards came up, and I got bit by the bug. The job allowed me free lessons and equipment use."

Watching her navigating a wave, water dripping down her toned body, hair slicked back would be quite the sight. "The

only time I surfed involved me sucking back buckets of sea water.”

Her attention darted to my mouth. Her pupils flared, as though mention of inhaling the ocean was akin to dirty talk. “Learning is rough.”

“Have you ever taught?”

“I prefer the rush of riding.” Her gaze dropped lower, to my groin. She nibbled her lower lip.

Was she picturing riding me? A shot of lust accompanied that visual. Although making love to her had been unreal, I hadn’t explored the lean lines of her body, kissed my way up her strong thighs. I suppressed my groan. “Maybe you could teach me some time.”

Although too turned on for my own good, I did mean the surfing. I wanted to enjoy a lazy Sunday walking the streets with Gwen, fall into a small lunch spot, lie in the grass while she read and I wrote music, learn to surf with her, sleep next to her, wake with her. Collect all our seconds, turning each into an eternity.

She stopped the lip nibbling. She might have stopped breathing, too. “Sure,” she said. It took a moment to realize she’d answered my surfing question, but it had been a distracted sure. *A we don’t have a future* sure.

I really fucking hated that sure.

She returned to analyzing the diary. I kept analyzing her: the full bottom lip I’d had between my teeth, the swell of her breasts in her fitted white tank top. She had beautiful breasts, small yet lush with tight pink nipples I hadn’t gotten to feast on, since I hadn’t removed her bra.

She slid her jaw to the side as she read a section carefully. I didn’t remember her doing that when we’d studied together, and I would know. I’d spent most of those hours like this, watching her, picturing her hands on my body, tugging down my jeans. My mouth on her.

We were close enough that I could reach forward and run my fingers through her wavy hair. I followed my instinct. I

couldn't keep away.

Air rasped through her teeth. "That's distracting."

"You're distracting."

"You know what I mean." But she didn't pull back. She leaned toward me.

My sweet Possum. "These are my seconds, honey. I need to touch you. And I'll figure out the rest with us. Please don't worry."

Already, I'd been poring over my schedule in my mind, blocking out times I'd return to San Francisco. Weeks I could fly Gwen to Europe. I'd plan it out, make it foolproof. She wouldn't have to do a thing but say yes. Instead of fighting me further, she turned her face into my hand and kissed my palm. Not an agreement, exactly, but the tender move nearly split me in two.

We stayed like that awhile: her flipping through her mother's journal, my hand in her hair, my heart playing an unsteady bass line.

Suddenly, she sat straighter. She lifted a flimsy cocktail napkin from inside the book. "She mentions a bar a few times, a place a guy used to take her. I think it's the same guy who watched her dance, but she never mentions his name."

"Considering she hid the journal in a defaced bible, I'm guessing she was worried it would be riffled through. Her parents weren't exactly lenient."

Gwen had snuck into my room the night she'd searched out her grandparents. She hadn't cried or ranted, but she'd picked her nails until they'd bled and had asked if she could sleep over. I'd watched her breathing softly the entire night.

She closed the book and held the napkin gingerly. "By the sounds of things, this guy knew the owner of the bar or a bartender, had no issues getting my mother served without her ID. Mary Hamilton liked her Long Island Iced Tea."

"I can't picture your mother drinking."

“I can’t picture her smiling or laughing or dancing. Drinking is tame compared to that. And this isn’t about her, anyway. I couldn’t care less what she was like. None of it changes the woman I knew.”

Her defensiveness said otherwise. Not that she’d listen to me. Gwen was stubborn like that. My fingers slipped through her hair in slow strokes. She clasped my wrist, stilling the movements. “I think this is our next clue, where we should go. If this guy knew the owner and he’s still around, we might get answers.”

*Ted Mercer*, I almost blurted. *That’s your father’s name.*

He’d lived in Oakland, only twenty minutes from his daughter. I hadn’t dug deeper, no point after learning he’d passed, but I had the name she’d sought her entire life.

I nearly spoke it aloud, but I clamped my mouth shut. Not because of my guilt or knowing my deception could obliterate our fragile footing. Not fully, at least. There were too many coincidences piling up: her mother’s letter to me, my choice to delay, Mary’s death, her luggage. A journal offering more insight into that woman than Gwen had gleaned in twenty-eight years. Like everything was happening for a reason, including learning about Mary Hamilton.

Gwen could pretend these scraps of information meant nothing. I saw how her eyes had widened when peering at that dancing photo in the TASC center, how she’d sucked in an amazed breath when Loretta Walsh had called Mary and her sister the Sunshine Girls.

Not knowing her father had always been a thorn in Gwen’s side, but living with a frigid mother had been the larger bruise on her childhood. This journey could help her understand what had stripped the light from Mary Hamilton’s world, lead Gwen to accept the woman Mary had been. That type of closure was invaluable. Plus, the odds of Gwen actually learning her father’s name before I left were slim to none. I’d have time to explain after.

“If that’s our next clue, then we better get on it,” I said.

“Badass PI partners?”

“As long as you don’t go telling anyone else I get the shits.”

She cackled. “I make no promises. And”—she held the napkin flat and read the writing on it—“looks like our next stop is the Blue-Eyed Raven.”

I reared back, stunned into silence. Three rough swallows later, I found my voice. “The Blue-Eyed Raven?” *Please tell me I heard her wrong.*

She nodded. “In Haight-Ashbury.”

Just my twisted luck. Another coincidence, this one as pleasant as chewing rocks.

Of all the bars in all of San Francisco, Mary Hamilton had to have set up camp where my twin brother now worked.



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10:00 P.M.

26 HOURS...



GWEN

According to August, the Blue-Eyed Raven was a Haight-Ashbury fixture, the sprawling bar once home to performing greats like Neil Young and Joni Mitchell. In its heyday, smoke had curled through the three-hundred-seat supper club, guitar licks rippling in the hazy air, weed and booze plentiful. Women had danced with women. Couples had swapped spouses.

Another of Mary Hamilton's shocking hangouts.

"Is it still popular?" I asked as I parked near the venue.

"Yes."

"Have you played there?"

"No."

"Do you *want* to play there?"

No answer.

I turned off the ignition but didn't release the key. We'd taken my car, and August had kept his hand at the back of my neck during the drive, his thumb rubbing mindless circles. As nice as the contact had been, the mindless part had been the antithesis of nice. The closer we'd gotten to the club, the quieter he'd become. The louder I wanted to scream.

I opted for confrontation. "What happened to your *let's savor our seconds* pact? Because the imposter in this car is

freaking me out.”

This entire situation was a giant pile of freak out. I’d shut down on him in my apartment, kept yo-yoing between the consuming desire to touch him and continuing my Popsicle routine, freezing him out. I wanted to thaw, but defrosting could end with me as a gooey, blubbery mess.

August released my neck and massaged his chest like it pained him. Streetlamps and passing cars cast buttery slices of light through the darkness. One spilled through the windshield, emphasizing the broody angles of his face. Without a word to me, he undid his seat belt, pushed open his door, and slammed it shut behind him. My seat vibrated. *I* vibrated. I wanted to be vibrating with August’s hard length thrusting inside me, not because I was a defrosting Popsicle.

My mind kept replaying how he’d felt, how my body still sizzled and swelled with want. On the drive here, I’d almost slipped my hand between his thighs, over his thick denim, to cop a feel of his girth. Fear had kept me fisting the steering wheel.

I sat immobile now, the car key clutched in my hand. I debated turning the ignition and tearing off as he rounded toward my side. I could leave right now, forget this journal and August and everything that had the power to break me, but I played my Popsicle game.

He opened my door and poked his head inside. “Come out here. We need to talk.”

His no-nonsense tone brooked zero argument. The dominance of it was kind of sexy, but mostly scary. *We need to talk* only ever meant heavy subjects, and I had all the heavy I could handle.

Instead of complying, I said, “Beetlejuice.”

August snort-laughed. The sound calmed a fraction of my panic.

Beetlejuice had been our safe word. When he’d pinch my underarm skin to distract me from his Monopoly cheating?

Beetlejuice. When I'd twist his nipple until he'd give me the remote control? Beetlejuice.

Blurting the word now was easier than facing his ominous *we need to talk*.

He straightened slightly, taking his face out of view. He leaned his forearm on the car roof. "You don't need a safe word for this conversation."

"Says you." But I could hear the smirk in his voice. I also liked the view.

The way we were situated—his crotch at face level, me strapped into my seat—I could undo his belt buckle, slip his zipper down, and take his length into my mouth. I salivated.

He backed away and crooked his finger, beckoning me. "Stop looking like you want to lick me, Possum. We need to talk. It won't be a nice talk, but we can't go into that club before it happens."

"That's quite the sales pitch." It was downright alarming. Unfortunately, I saw no other options.

I worked methodically, going through the steps of shoving the journal in my purse, leaving my car, and locking up extra slowly. *Delay, delay, delay*. A hot dog vendor was down the block, thick scents of charred meat teasing my nose. My belly rumbled. Our cheese and fruit earlier had only been a snack. I was hungry for food. I was hungry for August. I was *not* hungry to learn about the thing that wasn't nice to discuss.

I moved to the sidewalk and anchored myself against the car. "Go ahead. Rip off the Band-Aid."

His right hand was in his pocket. The fabric bulged rhythmically. He probably had a guitar pick in there. Whenever August was nervous or uneasy, he'd spin his pick restlessly. Like now. He gnawed on his bottom lip. "Finch manages the Blue-Eyed Raven."

I pitched forward slightly. "Excuse me?"

"Exactly."

Well, wasn't that just my luck? The day I made love with the brother I'd always wanted, I had to stand in a building with him and the one I should never have fucked. Good times, Gwen Hamilton. "How is that even possible?"

"How is it possible I show up at your door the same day as your mother's lost luggage?"

A slew of impossible impossibilities. I glanced toward the club, then to August, then at the inky sky. Nerves twisted my insides. I replayed Rachel's comment earlier, how she'd thought her birthday wish had been touched with magic and that believing in the unbelievable had given her the push she'd needed to fulfill her resolution. My self-imposed sink-or-swim deadline was in twenty-six hours, and fate had been dumping a pile of life preservers on my head.

August was entwined in this search, for some reason. Now his brother was, too. Trying to figure out why would drain energy and time I didn't have. The bigger issue was how seeing Finch would affect August now. The confrontation could shake the rickety suspension bridge we were navigating.

Maybe it already had.

Questions built in my throat until it burned. "Do you regret sleeping with me?"

He was on me in a heartbeat, his hands cradling my face. "No. Not for a second. Why would you think that?"

Relief flooded me, but barbs still chafed my windpipe. I hooked my thumbs through his belt loops. "The drive here—you were so...distracted? I mean, I get that seeing Finch now isn't ideal, but he's your brother. We can't avoid him forever." Which implied August and I had forever. *Seconds*, I reminded myself. This was nothing more than seconds and *right now* and enjoying the moment. I had a life here. A job. He was leaving. The barbs dug deeper.

He loosened his hold on me, enough that the scratch of his calluses became more pronounced. "The only regret I'll ever have with you, Gwen, is taking too long to pull my head out of my ass to understand we're bigger than what went down

between us. This thing with Finch—my moodiness on our way here—is partly because of that, but there’s more to it. Stuff I didn’t want to discuss tonight.”

“What stuff?”

Spine rigid, his attention drifted over my head, to the club beyond. “You sure you want to hear this now?”

“We’re about to see Finch, so I think the answer to that is obvious.”

The muscles in his jaw shifted, working mercilessly. I kissed the clenched knot and he softened slightly. “I know you think Finch and I always got along, but things got tense between us during high school.” He tilted his head side-to-side, brushing his cheek against my lips. “It’s great having an identical twin, growing up with someone who’s literally a part of you. I wouldn’t trade our childhood for anything. But looking the same comes with expectations of acting the same, performing the same. It frustrated the hell out of Finch.”

He leaned back slightly, his eyes shifting from distracted to piercing. Like he’d forgotten I was in front of him. “You are so goddamn beautiful.”

My heart swelled three sizes. “Are you stalling?”

He stared at me until my pulse pounded in my ears. “I might need you to pinch me sporadically, because I keep thinking I’m dreaming. The fact that I can touch you, kiss you”—he planted a hard one on my lips—“floors me. So if I stop mid-sentence from time to time to tell you how gorgeous you are, that your green eyes remind me of the first breath of spring, you’ll have to deal with it.”

I pinched his upper arm, as requested. To lighten the mood. To shrink my heart back to its proper size. Any bigger and the effects would be irreversible. “I see where you get your lyrics from.”

“Many from you, Possum.”

Oh, dear Lord. “Let’s not discuss ‘Girl with the Black Heart.’”

He shrugged a shoulder, no apology in his open gaze. I didn't want an apology. I'd deserved every biting word. "Back to the Finch issue," I said, nudging August's hip with mine.

He turned and planted his sexy behind against my car. I wanted to worship his ass. Bite the firm globes. Suck on the length of him until he shuddered and spilled into my mouth. God, even here, minutes from facing Finch and searching for my father, I could do little more than fantasize about August.

He drew me into his chest. "Finch started acting out end of our junior year. He was pissed I was chosen to captain our soccer team. He started smoking weed regularly. His grades dropped, like really dropped, and every time our folks celebrated something I did, he'd withdraw more. Not with his friends. He'd put on his Finch smile and pretend all was roses, but at home he'd barely look at me. It got worse the start of our senior year. You and I had stopped speaking, but I knew he still spent time with you, so I..." His arm tightened around my shoulder. "I asked him for a favor."

"Am I going to like this favor?"

"Unlikely."

Not that it mattered. He'd forgiven my unforgivable WTF. There were no grudges left to hold, not now, all these years later. I squeezed his waist, telling him I'd support him. I was here for him, the way I wished I'd been for the past nine years.

He exhaled a harsh breath. "I asked him to watch out for you. Spend time with you. Being cut off from you messed me up, but I was worried. Figured something else was going on. I had to make sure you were okay."

The weight of his arm slung over my shoulder suddenly turned crushing, and I fought the urge to shrug him off. It took every ounce of my control not to whirl on August and tell him I hadn't been his charity case. I hadn't been a helpless pet. As sweet as his gestures often had been, that was how I'd sometimes felt. That I'd been a problem for him to solve. A project he needed to ace, like everything else in his life.

Even now, I felt like I was seventeen again, shrinking smaller as Kayla Morgan told me August had pitied me. That I dragged him down. Long buried insecurities clawed to the surface, and I nearly screamed.

I wasn't that girl anymore. I jumped out of airplanes, for Christ's sake.

I was no longer a teenager who believed she was unlovable because her mother had sneered at her, called her unwanted. *Stupid*. I didn't walk through life trying to make as little noise as possible, avoiding friendships, commitments, believing myself unworthy. Yet here I was, anxiety-riddled self-doubt resurfacing.

I needed to get a grip.

I slowed my overactive lungs. I replayed his explanation, how he'd been worried about me back then. There had been no hidden agenda. He may have approached our relationship from a hero perspective, wanting to be the savior, but based on all we'd admitted to each other today, asking Finch to keep an eye on me had been out of desperation, not pity.

All because I'd cut him from my life.

I nestled deeper into August's side instead of pulling away. I was that woman now. A nestler, not a runner. "Did Finch show interest in me back then? Is that why he agreed?"

"He never said, but he knew exactly how I felt about you."

"Which made what we did even worse," I mumbled, still sick about it all.

"It did make it worse, but it wasn't the only reason." He looped a lock of my hair around his finger and twirled it. A guitar pick. My hair. Always busying his fingers. "The night I asked Finch to look out for you, he agreed...but asked for a favor in return." He twirled my hair faster. "He'd tanked his SATs and hadn't told me or our parents. I didn't know how bad his grades had gotten, either. He had one more chance to take the test in December of our senior year, and he needed that score."

"What did that have to do with you?"

“He asked me to take the test for him.”

Oh.

Fuck.

Identical twins.

“And you did it?” I couldn’t hide the shock in my voice. I’d once asked August to help me buy a fake ID. Everyone did it. No biggie. He’d laced into me, saying it was stupid, not worth getting caught. He never colored outside the lines.

“And I did it.” He quit fiddling with my hair. His body became a block of cement. “I wore his preppy clothes and his glasses, and no one was the wiser. I nearly puked before the test. I *did* puke after. Barely slept for the next few months, sure someone would find out and I’d be expelled, lose my chance at my scholarship. Be kicked off the soccer team. I was a wreck.”

Shame winded me. “So you did this insane, massive favor for Finch.” For me, really. So his brother would watch out for *me*. “And Finch promised to be my shadow, knowing how you felt about me. Then...that night happened?”

“That about sums it up.”

If he weren’t holding me up, I’d sink to my haunches and bury my face in my hands. August’s requested favor explained Finch’s increased attentiveness toward the end of high school, into college. Finch would drag me out for coffee, force me to meet him at the library for study sessions. But his words to me that fateful night—*I’ve wanted you so long*—hadn’t been the words of a brother doing a brother a favor. Especially considering what August had done for him.

“I didn’t think I could feel worse about what went down, but this is definitely worse.” Profoundly worse. *Shove me in a cell and toss away the key* worse.

August spun me quickly, pulled me tight against his chest. “I didn’t tell you to guilt you, but Finch and I never recovered from that night. We speak as needed, but we’re only civil. Not because of what you did. Because my brother betrayed me. I put my future on the line for him, and he fucked me over.”

It all made sense now, how furious August had been that night. The vicious punch to Finch's face. "I'm so sorry."

"No." His tone turned vehement. "Don't apologize. I'm done playing the victim. There's no changing the past, and I don't want you spending these next couple days feeling badly. I forgave you. Not just with words. There's no anger left. We're too important. Our time together is too important."

Our seconds. This finite slice of time. "I don't know how to do this."

"Oh, honey. I'll take care of you. Of us. Don't worry. I'll make this work." He kissed me, sweet and slow.

Kissing was one solution. A mighty fine one. The rest was August taking charge, always trying to solve my problems. He didn't know my life here, what I could and couldn't do. He hadn't even asked what I *wanted* to do. But his lips were addictive, coaxing mine into action. I kissed him back harder, the two of us moving against each other with such devastating need. His lips were soft yet firm. His body was all firm.

"I plan to fuck you blind tonight," he said against my lips. "Taste every inch of you. Have you come on my tongue and fingers. You don't even know."

My body sure as hell knew. "I'm so wet. You make me so wet."

"Jesus, Gwen." His mouth was on my neck, licking and sucking. "I'll never get enough of you."

Not in two days he wouldn't. But I might lose my heart.

That sobering notion had me abruptly ending our PDA. I heard a whistle, but wasn't sure it was directed at us, not that I cared. What I did care about was not falling to pieces over this man, who had to get on an airplane in *one and a half* days.

I needed to feel him inside me again. I wouldn't deny myself that. But my feelings for him were already ten-foot swells, ready to drag me under. I had to keep an emotional distance, not do stupid things like wish I wasn't on the pill.

Following the journal's clues was the perfect distraction. The breather I needed. Which meant facing Finch. "You still okay to come in the club with me?"

"I'm not leaving your side until I get on that plane."

He wasn't making my emotional armor easy to wear. "Even when I have to pee?"

"You've peed next to me before."

I had. Our tenth-grade graduation had been a raucous affair. Someone had organized a field party, and I'd drunk my weight in peach schnapps. August had stood sentry while I'd squatted in the grass. He'd later held my hair back while I'd puked. The best friend a girl could have.

"Okay," I said, tugging him toward the club.

He tugged me back. His hooded eyes drank me in, dropping to my neck. His pupils flared. "I gave you a hickey."

I touched my feverish skin and laughed. "Are we sixteen?"

"It means you're mine," he replied, his voice thick.

My voice got stuck. I couldn't be his. Not with his itinerary. Being his meant losing myself, and the last time that happened, after my WTF, I'd tripped so far down a rabbit hole, I'd gotten lost in the bramble. "When we're inside," I said, deflecting, "holler if you need to leave."

He considered me a moment, stared so intently I looked away. "I'll use our safe word," he said.

Nothing about my feelings for him felt safe.



## AUGUST

I led the way to the club, still high from kissing Gwen. From touching Gwen. From marking Gwen's skin. Unfortunately, the way she'd disconnected her lips from mine and her subject

change just now hinted at her worry. She was holding herself back, keeping a piece of her heart protected. I'd quit trying to guard mine. She was everything to me, the center of my best childhood memories, the reason I wrote music. She had all of me, and I'd have all of her before my plane took off. As long as this search for her father didn't backfire.

And Finch didn't ruin things again.

A bouncer was at the club door. He had a neck thicker than a tree trunk, bald head, tattooed neck. His black suit was definitely purchased at a big and tall shop. He saluted me, as though we knew each other. "You shaved, Mr. Cruz."

I kept Gwen's hand firmly in mine and offered him a tight smile. "Wrong Mr. Cruz. I came to see my brother." No point avoiding that particular elephant.

He grinned, displaying two gold teeth. "Oh...right. Sure. Go on in. Hope to catch you on stage later."

I'd wanted to play the Blue-Eyed Raven stage for years. It drew mid-sized bands these days, and bigger acts wanting an intimate setting. The sound system was killer, the audience filled with music devotees. Finch had managed the venue the past five years, bringing it back to life after it had dropped off the radar. He'd never asked me to play. I'd never offered. Our ongoing stalemate.

I led Gwen to the semi-circular bar cradling the patron-filled tables, most enjoying some sort of dessert. Between sets, likely.

She pressed closer to my side. "It's sexy in here."

"You're sexy."

Even in the sultry lighting, her eyes sparkled. "Trouble," she mumbled.

She scanned the instrument-filled stage—piano, bass, a couple horns, and one hot-as-hell Fender. The walls and ceilings had been remodeled, the moldings giving the room an art deco vibe. Blues tunes drifted from speakers. Servers wore twenties-inspired dresses and suits. Yeah, I'd always wanted to play this club, and it would probably never happen.

Never loosening my hold on Gwen's hand, I nodded to the bartender. "Is Finch in?"

The woman did a double-take. "You're August Cruz."

"I am." Although people like that ballerina occasionally recognized me, I mostly flew under the radar when outside Europe. Not where my brother worked.

She planted her hands on her hips and shook her head. The feather in her bobbed hair caught the light. "I'd always hoped you'd play here. I love 'Girl with a Black Heart.'"

From my angle, I could see Gwen roll her eyes, and I had to muffle my laugh. What had happened between us wasn't amusing. Writing that song hadn't been, either. But man, if we couldn't laugh about it now, find some humor in the darkness, we'd never make it. "It's one of my favorites," I said, dragging Gwen closer. "I used to act it out on a voodoo doll."

"Hardy-har-har." This from a glowering Gwen.

The waitress detailed a bad breakup of hers, a painful time the song had paralleled. I winked at Gwen, who mouthed, *Not funny*. But it kind of was.

"Shoot. Sorry." The waitress waved a frazzled hand. "I've monopolized you. I'll call up to Finch, tell him you're here."

Gwen watched the servers bussing tables, the animated patrons chatting. I watched Gwen. She'd always had this effortless beauty about her, but it was amplified now. Her shorter hair was wavy and loose, like she'd been at the beach, her casual bangs falling longer at the sides, framing her stunning face. Looking at her hurt in a visceral way. Tore at pieces of me. Except the hickey. That mark made me smile.

Then I spotted Finch, and my smile nose-dived.



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10:30 P.M.

25 ½ HOURS...



## AUGUST

Finch stood at a side door, arms crossed, legs wide, scanning the room like he owned the place. Which he kind of did. Not in name or money, but he'd rebuilt the Raven's reputation, act by act, month by month. I'd watched his progress from afar, impressed with the growing praise. He deserved the accolades he'd earned. Didn't make dealing with him any easier.

The second his sights locked on me, his chin jerked upward, and a fizzy feeling snaked through me. The lighting made it tough to read his expression.

"He's coming over." I anchored my arm around Gwen. *To ground her*, I told myself. But that swirling in my gut lessened.

She held her purse against her stomach. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"The owner isn't around much, but he's the same guy who ran the place when your mother came here. If anyone has answers for you, it's him. Finch is your connection."

My brother was the link to her past. Maybe her closure. Maybe mine, too. All our paths converging. Keeping tabs on my twin's life from across the globe, pretending I didn't want to call and congratulate him on his success, had gotten harder over the years. Seeing firsthand how lively and full the club was made me want to drag him in for a hug. None of it changed our past.

He strutted toward us, confidence in his long strides. His hair was longer than mine, curling at the base of his neck. His short beard was new. The changes made us look different, but only slightly. It was still like facing a mirror.

He stopped in front of us, took in my arm around Gwen. Our close proximity. The bastard grinned. “Are you two finally together?”

There were a thousand things we needed to hash out, but that grin had the snake pit in my gut calming. “We are.”

But Gwen said, “No,” and I jolted. She talked over herself. “I mean, we’re hanging out. But we’re not *together* together.”

What in the actual fuck?

The hickey on her neck was from me. Her body had been mine two short hours ago. She could kid herself all she wanted, but we were as together as together got. Something we’d deal with later. For now we were on a PI mission. “We’re looking for Uncle Rex.”

“You have an uncle Rex?” She glanced between Finch and me.

Finch shook his head. “It’s the name he goes by—the club owner. Everyone calls him Uncle Rex.” His eyes cut to me, squinting like a far-sighted man trying to read small type. “But if you want to play here, I’m the guy you speak with. Not Uncle Rex.”

The hurt on his face was plain as day. “This isn’t about playing. We need a favor.”

His squinting intensified. “And you thought you’d walk in here, ask a favor of me, when we’ve barely spoken in years?”

“I don’t know, Finch. You’re the king of asking for favors and welching on your end of the agreement.”

He looked down sharply, pursed his lips. Frustrated with himself? Shutting me out? We’d yelled at each other plenty since college, me calling him a selfish bastard, him telling me to grow up and forgive him already. More recently, we’d simply turned distant, flat.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, but that wasn’t exactly true. I still spoke with our sister. Not weekly, or even monthly, but we kept in touch, and I’d do anything for her. Fighting with Melody would gut me. But resentment between twins was different. A part of my heart had hardened over the years. Like we’d been conjoined twins, hearts linked, arteries connected, our estrangement deadening the tissue.

His eyes flicked up, a hint of pleading lifting his brow. “It matters.”

That hard place in me cracked.

Gwen stayed mute, letting us do our estranged brother thing, her purse tucked under her arms like it would shield her from our strained reunion.

I hadn’t planned to unleash my anger on Finch, like I hadn’t planned to lash out at Gwen at her mother’s house. Our shared history brought out the worst in me, which meant it needed to be dealt with. No more pretending and running and writing my angst into songs. That journal had led us both here for a reason. It was time to find out why.

Relinquishing my possessive hold on Gwen, I dashed my hand through my hair. “Can Gwen get in touch with Uncle Rex tonight? For her, not for me. She has some questions about a man who came here in the late eighties, possibly her father. And if you have a moment, I’d like to talk.”

Finch was in black slacks and a gray button-down, shiny shoes to match. The consummate professional, who’d done a kickass job bringing this club back to life.

To me, he’d always be the kid who’d shared a tent with me in our back yard, his ghostly flashlight shining on the flimsy blue material as he’d terrorize me with horror stories. He would eat the broccoli off my plate and I’d eat his lamb, his suggestions to avoid staring at food we’d rather burn than touch. Finch would make our younger sister laugh when she’d cry about the braces she’d hated or skinning her knee. He’d made us lightsabers and had rolled me my first joint. Even helped me ride a skateboard when I’d given up.

I was older by five minutes, but he'd been the wiser of us, until he'd slid downhill at the end of high school. Until he'd asked me to do a brutal favor I still regretted.

Until he'd slept with Gwen.

But like with her, during this wild day, the earlier years seemed to outweigh the later mistakes. Gwen was unpacking her mother's lost luggage, one clue at a time. Facing her demons. I was ready to deal with mine.

Finch scrubbed a hand over his beard and nodded at a round table. "Uncle Rex is here tonight, has his niece and nephew with him. I'll ask if he can spare a minute."

After another long glance at me, he moved through the room, stopping to shake hands with people, laugh with some, flirt with others. He worked the stretch between us and Uncle Rex's table like a bona-fide celebrity. I might be the one with albums and fans, but here, in this jazzy room I'd always wanted to play, he was the more successful brother.

Pride snuck up on me in a fierce jab. Solid. Good. Nice to think of Finch without curling my hands into fists.

Gwen smoothed her hand down my back. "I'm glad you'll talk with Finch. I hate seeing you guys at odds."

I hated it, too. It was time to set things right. But the last thing I wanted to discuss with Gwen was Finch. "You told him we weren't together."

She snatched her hand from my back. "Why'd you tell him we are?"

She had to be kidding me. I leaned my forearm on the bar, dipped so our faces were level. "I'm sorry, Possum... was I the only one on the floor in your apartment earlier? Did you not feel me inside you? Did I not make you come? Did we not discuss how often I planned to do more of the same later?"

Her lips parted. If the music were quieter, I'd bet I'd hear her whimper. But she said, "Having sex isn't a relationship."

"That wasn't sex. We made love, and you know it."

“We said seconds—that we’d focus on our time now, not the future. Today’s the first I’ve seen you in nine years. No one in their right mind would call you my boyfriend. That goes against every relationship rule.”

“Then I must be certifiable, because when it comes to you and me, Gwen, there are no rules. We aren’t other people. The second I had my mouth on you, *my cock in you*, you became mine, and I became yours.”

“You leave in two days.” Her chin wobbled. I didn’t want her chin to wobble. Every minute together was valuable.

I kissed her forehead, pressed a soft one to her lips. “I’ll fly you out to visit me. I’ll come home when I can. We’ll look at a calendar and map it all out.”

“It’s not that simple. I’ve been treading water all night, trying to savor our seconds like we agreed. Not let all these emotions drown me. I want this time with you. I want....” She shook her head as though having an internal conversation. “Honestly? I have no clue what I want. And you haven’t even asked me. But you’re going on like we’re engaged.”

A notion I could sink into. Gwen was it for me. Come hell or high water, or a swarm of locusts, she would be mine. Having her once wasn’t enough. Having her for the rest of my life wouldn’t be enough. She didn’t see it. Because of our history, maybe. Our different lives now. None of it meant a damn thing.

I opened my mouth to say as much, put my heart in her hands, but Finch returned.

“Uncle Rex will chat with you.” His gaze lingered on Gwen’s taut body, every compact inch displayed in her slim jeans and tank top. The urge to punch him returned. To me, he said, “We can talk in my office.”

Gwen was up before I could reply, her purse clutched to her side as she maneuvered toward Uncle Rex, not a glance at me. I wanted to pummel Finch and yell at Gwen until she saw reason. None of it would do me a lick of good.



GWEN

I couldn't get away from August fast enough. He didn't understand how hard this was for me, how low I'd sunk after I'd thought I'd lost him for good. If I let him in fully, opened myself to the possibility that we were more than this blip of time and we didn't work out, the fall wouldn't be pretty. It would be a free-climbing disaster, a bungee jump without a cord.

You'd have to scrape me off the ground.

I kept my focus on the boisterous round table Finch had visited. *Finch*. I still hadn't recovered from seeing him again, those two boys—no, *men*—side by side. I had never apologized to Finch after our night together, either. He'd gone backpacking. I'd disappeared inside myself. Our coffee hours and library studying had vanished the next year. We'd make eye contact across a room, and one of us would turn the other way. My avoidance skills had been top notch.

Here, all these years later, I wanted to say the things I'd never said. Explain to him how dejected I'd been, apologize for using him. But not with August around. That was a conversation for Finch and me alone.

All that concerned me now was finding my father. Funny how that had become the less stressful aspect of this night. The not-easy/easier problem.

Wigged out on zany adrenaline, I zeroed in on my target.

If a walrus took human form, it would be Uncle Rex. He was a round man with a bulbous nose, his gray eyebrows an entity of their own. His handlebar moustache was overgrown, his sparse hair pulled into a frizzy ponytail. He whispered in the man's ear at his left. The tall man vacated his seat, smiling as he passed me.

Uncle Rex patted the chair. “Finch tells me you’re looking for someone.” His voice was gruff and rumbly, as though he’d smoked a pack of cigarettes and had shouted for an hour.

I accepted his invitation, grateful to sit. My limbs felt heavy. My heart felt heavier after bickering with August. The urge to turn and search him out was powerful, but I gripped my purse tighter, felt the journal tucked inside. “I’m sorry to interrupt your night, but yeah—I’m looking for a man who would have frequented this place in the late eighties. I don’t know his name or what he looked like.”

“Sounds like quite the puzzle.”

I huffed out a humorless laugh. “One I’ve been trying to solve for twenty years.”

“Okay.” He twisted one of the rings on his stubby fingers. “Lay it on me. What do ya know?”

“He came here with a woman, Mary Hamilton.”

He frowned. “The name don’t ring a bell, but most wouldn’t.”

I sifted through what else I’d learned, a clue that could trigger his memory. “She danced at the TASC center, was part of a group called the Sunshine Girls.”

He slapped the table, his eyes disappearing in a happy squint. “Yeah, sure. That babe lit up a room.”

Now my mother had been a *babe*. Would wonders never cease? “You knew her?”

“I wished I’d known her better, if you get my drift.” He winked.

Attempting to incinerate that visual, I debated what to ask next. How best to figure out who my father was. But the question that escaped surprised the heck out of me. “What was she like?”

“Sweet as pie. Funny. Always making the servers laugh. Said if she didn’t become a dancer, she wanted to be a comedian. Make the world smile. But, man, when she

danced?” He whistled. “The whole room watched. Bet she wound up on Broadway, like she planned.”

A comedian. A Broadway star. A girl who’d dreamed of greatness. She’d had high hopes for an exciting future. Heat pricked my eyes.

I’d never forget the day I came home to find my CD collection gone. My mother had trashed them, claimed my music was the reason my grades were poor. She’d hidden my guitar, too. My gift from August. All because my eighth-grade teacher had shown up at our house to explain I had a learning disorder. That I needed visual cues and support at home and school.

My mother’s supportive reply: “She just needs to work harder.”

She’d excelled in demoralizing me back then, but surprisingly, *amazingly*, for the first time in my twenty-eight years, I wanted to know Mary Hamilton. Something bigger than giving birth to me must have destroyed her spirit. Something to do with my father.

The man I was determined to find.

Doubts silenced my further questions. Turning that stone could unearth a whole whack of spiders. The scary, jumping, hairy kind. I could leave that rock alone, forget this ridiculous quest, but that choice led to more unanswered questions, more wondering, more years feeling untethered. “Did you know the man?” I asked Uncle Rex. “The one she came here with?”

He motioned to a waitress and tapped his empty tumbler. “His name was Ted, I think. Or Tom? She never gave me the time of day, but with her fella?” He hummed a rough, gravelly tune. “Those two were hot for each other, but I didn’t know him well.”

Another image I’d prefer to torch. “Is there anything else? Anything you can tell me about him? Where he lived? What kind of car he drove? Was he ever here with other women, or just her?”

“Sorry, doll. The Sunshine Girl drank Long Island Iced Tea. They were always together. You’re lucky I remember that much. Those days tend to blur and I’m—” He stopped abruptly. His attention drifted up, toward the ceiling. “Actually, there was one thing. Forgot about it until now. Another girl looking for him once, asking around. Only remember ’cause she seemed pissed. On a mission to find him.”

“What did she look like? How old was she?”

He clucked his tongue. “Got me there. Sorry I can’t be more help.”

Disappointment set in, but I fought it off. I’d learned a name, at least. Ted or Tom. That another woman in his life had gone looking for him. An illicit lover, maybe? That would explain how a couple falling in love had fallen apart, but it didn’t shed light onto why a suitcase from 1990 had gone missing in 2001, only to turn up in 2018. Still, it was more than I had before.

I sensed someone behind me and turned, hopeful to spot August, eager to share what little I’d learned. It was the tall man whose seat I’d usurped.

Taking my cue, I thanked Uncle Rex and returned to the bar. Finch and August weren’t around. They were likely having their talk privately, a heart-to-heart that hopefully didn’t involve comparing their sexual encounters with yours truly. Sleeping with twin brothers was something portrayed in pornos. It was the worst kind of reality show.

It was also my life, as were these meager clues, and the upsetting conversation I’d had with August. He wouldn’t let the argument go. He was stubborn like that. He’d push and push until I admitted how far gone I was for him. As though that would solve everything.

If he’d seen me after my WTF, he’d know how fragile he made me. I’d built my body since then, reveling in ripping my muscle tissue, letting it repair, grow. Feeling strong made me feel sexy. It also made me feel in control. August made me feel weak. The second I admitted as much to him, the second I

claimed him as mine, there would be no repairing that torn tissue.

No protecting my heart when he left.

Ignoring that prospect, I waved down the bartender and ordered a Long Island Iced Tea. Because my mother had loved them. Because she'd sat here and enjoyed this strong drink, underage, dancing and making strangers laugh. I only managed two sips.

I wedged my nose in her journal, had to carefully separate pages that had a tendency to stick together. She wrote about a lookout spot where she and this boy would watch the stars. She'd doodled in a few corners, a simple sun wearing sunglasses, a cigarette dangling from its sunny mouth. It was childish and silly, and kind of cute.

The next page had me pressing my hand over my racing heart:

*He gave me my first drink. My first cigarette. My first taste of freedom. He couldn't believe I had never tried a hotdog and dragged me to the stand outside the club. If my mother saw me bite into that processed meat, she would have lost her mind.*

*Well, FUCK YOU MOM.*

*I got ketchup on the corner of my mouth, and he wiped it off. So gently. We stared at each other forever. He must have known I had lain awake wishing for a kiss. Then he did it. He just leaned down...and wow. He kissed me! I didn't know what to do. If I should open my mouth or drop the hotdog or let him slip his tongue against mine. He was so sweet. So, so, so amazing. I never knew kissing could be everything. That it could fill you up. Make you float. It was better than dancing. And nothing is better than dancing. I didn't want it to end. I never want us to end.*

It mirrored my feelings for August, that deep, searing need to reach for permanence. To make each kiss last. If he made me float the way this mystery man had sparked life into Mary Hamilton, it meant I could wind up broken and bitter like her, too.



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11:00 P.M.

25 HOURS...



## AUGUST

Finch led me up a set of narrow stairs, into his office. He pulled a bottle of Talisker from his desk drawer, set out two tumblers, and poured us each two fingers of the ten-year-old Scotch. “I’m guessing this conversation will go down better with a little lubrication.”

I accepted my glass gratefully and took a healthy sip. The burn streaked through my chest, loosened my neck. “You guessed right.”

We stared at each other. We glanced at our drinks. There were no answers in the amber liquid, no easy way to broach this conversation we’d danced around for nine years.

Finch chose avoidance. “So—you and Gwen, huh?”

“If I have anything to say about it, yes.” I winced at the edge to my voice. Always challenging with him. Always waiting for him to snark back.

He kept his tone even. “She being her usual cagey self?”

“She is.” Finch understood Gwen’s history, how hard it was for her to trust and let go. It was nice not having to explain it, but it wasn’t the reason we were standing here, making eye contact and glancing away, drinking instead of saying what mattered. I swallowed a measure of Scotch, let the heat of it mellow in my chest, and finally found my voice. “I’m tired of being pissed off at you.”

His shoulders lowered as a heavy breath pushed through his nose. “I’m tired of being pissed at myself, too. I’ve spent a lot of time hating myself, looking for relief here.” He swirled his glass. A sad, defeated movement. “But I can’t change what I did. Can’t give you those years back with Gwen. All I can do is apologize and hope it’s enough. But it never has been, has it? Which I get, in a way. Then I see you with Gwen tonight, that you’ve forgiven her, and...” The pain on his face cut me down at my knees. “Why can’t you forgive me?”

“But that’s the thing. You and me”—I gestured aggressively between us, my voice still biting, always biting—“what you did wasn’t simple. It was calculated. I was desperate back then, worried about Gwen. You saw my weakness and pounced. You used me to get into college, something I still regret to this day. You used me to get close to Gwen, knowing how I felt about her. So I guess I need to know why. If I’m going to move on, I need to understand.”

Hip resting on his messy desk, he stared into his tumbler again. Dark paneled walls accentuated our tension, the expanse broken up by pictures of Finch with famous musicians. The one of him arm-and-arm with Eric Clapton caught my eye. Warmth pressed against my ribs. There was that pride again, hovering below my frustration. Subtle, but still there.

Finch swigged the rest of his Scotch and grimaced. “I’d like to tell you I had some kind of altruistic motivation. I thought I liked Gwen. I actually thought I loved her. In reality, I wanted something you couldn’t have, to come first in something for once.”

Drink clutched in one hand, I found my guitar pick with my other, deep in my pocket. I pressed the edge into my thumb and waited for him to go on.

“Thing is, I was always one step behind you. Not as strong on the soccer field. You aced high school without even trying. You were a freak of nature with your guitar. And there I was, always known as August’s brother. The other twin. You don’t know what that was like, but it’s a shitty reason to do what I did. I knew how brutal taking my SATs would be for you. I

knew you'd lose your mind over me and Gwen. And hurting her in the process destroyed me. It made me realize I needed to grow up and own who I was. I can't change what I did. I'm sorry it happened. I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry for a thousand things, but I miss my brother and I'd like to have him back."

I couldn't deny missing him. Our innate connection couldn't be duplicated—laughing at the same jokes, trading a look without having to speak, the comfort of him being in my corner. I'd also been jerked around by promoters over the years, had had issues with my record label. Finch was in the business, knew the ropes. I'd needed someone to talk to, someone I could trust.

I'd needed him.

Still, I'd held back from reaching out, nursed my grudge instead. He was right, though. There was no going back. Only forward. What he did had sucked. Holding onto my anger sucked more. "You know what's really messed up?" I said.

"Aside from the fact that the girl you wrote hate songs about was looking at you downstairs like you were a blue jelly bean?"

Her favorite candy as kids. I rubbed my overheating neck. "She looked at me like that?"

He chuckled. "Dude, you've always been blind where Gwen's concerned."

The buzz that filled me burned hotter than my next sip of Scotch. "Trust me, I know. What I don't get is both you and Gwen resented me on some level as teens. She felt like I made her my charity case, and you obviously had it in for me. I just don't remember being overly cocky about soccer, music. Any of it. Enough to make you guys feel like shit."

"You think the sun notices when it outshines the moon?"

"Are you writing lyrics now?"

"You can fuck off. But think about it. Life was good to you. You never struggled. It taints your perception, makes you less aware of what others are going through."

I slammed my glass on his filing cabinet, harder than necessary. “I was nothing but aware of Gwen’s situation. I did everything I could to help her through it.”

He swayed his head side to side, unruffled by my aggressive stance. “Yes and no.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You offered her *your* quick fixes—the things that made you happy, because you excelled at them. You taught her guitar, but played better than her. You let her win at soccer, and she knew it. You helped her study, because she learned slower than you. Of course she felt like your charity case.”

“So I was supposed to suck at things?”

“For a smart guy, August, you’re pretty dense.”

I bit down on my molars. “Then dumb it down for me, Einstein.”

“Gwen had to find *her* answers, the things that made her happy. Like I needed to step out of your shadow and be my own man. It’s not your fault. We were kids. We had to grow up and figure out who we were.”

“And that makes it okay to steal the girl I loved?”

“No, man...no.” He hung his head.

I swore under my breath. We’d seesawed from strained apologies to reminiscing to tense again. We might both be ready to make amends. Didn’t mean the road would be easy.

“Look,” he said, “you did you back then, and I reacted in a shitty way. Gwen drowned in her self-pity. We all had issues. And the reason you plummeted off the deep end after I slept with her, besides the obvious, was because you’d never had to deal with...well, anything. Nothing was ever hard for you.”

I crossed my arms, glared at the maroon carpet between us. Going off the deep end was an understatement. For a guy who’d cruised through school and sports, dropping out of college and escaping to Europe had been beyond rebellious. Our folks had lost their minds, begged me to come home and talk to them, a counselor, anyone. I spoke with them

eventually, could never erase them from my life, but everything had lost its meaning.

The easy life I'd enjoyed had lost its luster.

I guess I hadn't known disappointment back then, the setback of coming in second, third, anything but first. Fuck. Had I really been that big of a prick?

Forcing my good fortune on Gwen, like that would make her happy, probably emphasized what she didn't have. What she couldn't do. All she'd ever wanted was my heart, and I'd tried to solve her problems instead.

"I'm doing it again with her," I said, dazed and clear at the same time.

"Doing what?"

"I leave for Germany Monday morning, and she keeps freaking out about it, won't get too close to me. I'm a mess over it, but I know we can make it work. We have to make it work. So I keep telling her not to worry, that we'll figure it out. But I guess that's me taking control again. Making her—*us*—my project. I haven't even asked her what she wants to do." I tried to swallow, but my saliva thickened. "I can't lose her, Finch. She's...just...I can't go through this again, not after being with her. What do I do?"

His dark eyebrows winged upward. "You're asking *my* advice?"

His surprise almost made me laugh, something I hadn't done with Finch in an eternity. It was odd to be with him, angry one second, leaning on him the next. Searching for my twin under nine years of unyielding grudges. He was there, though. He was in front of me, asking my forgiveness. Blocking him out had only embittered me.

"You know her. You seem to know *me* better than I know myself." Even though we'd barely spoken. Finch could always see right through me. "So, yeah—I'm asking for your help. Begging for it, actually."

He assessed me, a deep stare that lingered, then he grinned. It wasn't the easy grin I'd once known, but there was hope in

it, thankfulness. It breathed life into my deadened arteries, beating the hardened section of my heart back to life.

“I appreciate that,” he said, “more than you’ll ever realize. And I know just the thing to do.”



GWEN

So focused on the journal, I jumped when Finch settled onto the barstool beside me. He studied the diary. “Must be a good book.”

A surprising page-turner. I was only halfway through because I’d slowed down. Instead of skimming for clues, I’d read Mary Hamilton’s words carefully, hanging off each one, desperate to learn how I’d been conceived, if she’d sensed betrayal from her man. Another woman in his life. I hadn’t even noticed the band on stage, six guys with a country-rock vibe. Plaid shirts. Beards. Hipsters with a twang and a horn section.

I pointed to Finch’s scruffy face. “You’d blend in on stage.”

He massaged his beard. “Makes the talent feel comfortable. I’ll be sporting a mohawk and nose ring for next week’s gig.”

“You’d look ridiculous with a nose ring.”

“I’m insulted and offended.” His cheeky smirk said otherwise.

“You can insult me back. Take your best shot.” Punishment I deserved. Anything to assuage the guilt that had been chasing me since August had revealed the extent of our betrayal. Finch’s fault, largely. That didn’t absolve me of my part.

Finch tipped up his chin, considering me. “That frilly blouse you wore for all our grade-school class pictures? That abomination burned my retinas.”

“Which is why I had it incinerated.” The flowered nylon travesty haunted me to this day. “Your neon high-tops broke every fashion law imaginable.”

“You took your Green Day love to loser levels.”

“Your soccer jersey phase would have been fine if you’d washed it from time to time.” I fanned my nose.

“That jersey was the shit.”

Sitting here, joking like old times, was the shit. It was also a distraction that didn’t change the past. I sighed and shook my head. “I’m sorry, Finch. For everything that went down. I used you that night. I was lonely, and I wanted to hurt August, two reasons that shouldn’t have ended with us in bed.”

He ran his tongue over his teeth. “No, they shouldn’t have. But I was just as shallow. I didn’t think so at the time, really thought I’d been in love with you, but I was in love with the idea of you. I wanted what August couldn’t have.”

The revelation winded me. “So we used each other? To hurt him?”

“We were quite the pair.”

The band finished a song, applause and whistles filling the room. I didn’t glance away from Finch. My regrets over what we’d done to August lived permanently behind my breastbone. It also irked me, what Finch had asked of August, falsifying his SATs. But moving on meant accepting our mistakes. “Does that mean I’m forgiven?”

“Only if I am, too.”

I pressed my hand to his thigh. Not a sexual gesture. It was grounding, a tether to our past. Hopefully one to our future, too. “Did you guys talk? Work things out?”

“Mostly. It’ll take a bit to really move on, but we took the first steps. Like you guys did.”

August and I had taken more than a step. We’d taken a running leap, and I still hadn’t landed. I searched the dimly lit room, no sign of him anywhere. “Where is he?”

“Taking his next step.”

Before I could ask what that meant, the voice that had filled my stereo and iPod the past nine years flowed through the speakers.

August was on stage, mic at his lips as he settled on a stool and introduced himself. The other band members filed off. I held my breath. I’d watched August on YouTube, had listened to each of his albums on repeat. Never had I seen him live on stage, spotlights sharpening his cheekbones, shadows darkening his eyes.

My broody, sexy man.

“I’ve had kind of a wild day,” he said as he plucked at the guitar strings, tuning it, learning the instrument. It had always been second nature to him. Like breathing. I’d enjoyed guitar because it was something I could do with August. He’d loved it because it was his oxygen.

“The kind of day,” he went on, eyes downcast, random notes strummed, “that knocks you on your ass. Reminds you what’s important in life. Teaches you you’re dumber than you realize.”

The crowd laughed. A nervous sound bubbled out of me.

He lifted his gaze then, his eyes black from this distance. He stared right at me. “This one’s for the only girl who ever mattered.”

The emotional distance I’d been struggling to maintain thinned. I wanted to be at the front of the stage, tossing my bra at his feet, slinging my underwear at his face. I wanted to be his groupie and his girlfriend.

Then he strummed the opening to “Girl with the Black Heart.”

Now I wanted to light the stage on fire. “What the fuck is he doing?”

Finch looked horrified. “Not what I told him to do.”

I punched his shoulder, because I couldn’t punch August. “Does he think he’s being funny?”

Finch rubbed his arm. “I think he’s lost his mind.”

Oh, he was going to lose his mind, all right. I’d shake him until he couldn’t form a freaking sentence. My nails bit into my clenched palms, sweat gathering under my bangs. I was going to kill August Cruz and his not-funny sense of humor. How could he think I’d enjoy this? Or was he trying to end things before they got too complicated? Hurt me the way I’d hurt him, gloriously, publicly.

August sang the opening to his hate song, unwavering attention on my face. After the first chorus, people began glancing at me. There was no mistaking August’s focus and who the lyrics described.

She turned my world black  
Darkness spewed from a liar  
The only way to seek light  
Was to light her shadow on fire.

Shame seared my throat. Energy drained from my limbs. It hurt worse than the first time I’d heard the hateful lyrics, and regret reared its ugly head.

There was hurt in August’s raspy voice, but it wasn’t resentful hurt, like when he’d lit into me at my mother’s. That long-overdue confrontation had been ripe with bitterness. This was different—softer, plaintive—similar to our small fight here, at the bar. Because I’d held him at a distance, like always. Scared to hold on. Scared to love and lose.

Guess I hadn’t changed much since my pathetic teen years.

“I’ll fucking kill him,” Finch whispered.

He should have directed his aggravation at me.

I’d forced August’s hand. We had less than two days together, and I fought us every step of the way, giving him my body, not my soul. If this was him ending things now, because I couldn’t offer him that chance, trust him with my heart, the

fallout could be catastrophic. The type of regret that led to losing the music from your world. Sucking the dance and color from your life. Even so, I wasn't sure I could give him what he wanted: all of me.

The song shifted, the chorus changing from the one I'd memorized. I frowned. Then I bit my lip.

She turned my world black  
Because she owned my heart  
A connection deeper than forgiveness  
The kind that brings a fresh start

He'd rewritten the next stanza, too, singing of his blindness, his stupidity, *his* regrets. August's lyrics were always simple. His voice set him apart. The deep rasp crooned with such emotion the listener couldn't help but be swept away.

The final chorus threatened to shatter me.

I'm hers to break or fix  
A timepiece of fragile parts  
My hour always set to her  
The girl who owns my heart

"Wow," Finch said.

That wasn't wow. That was everything.

August's gaze was fierce, locked on me. I couldn't look away. Maybe I could do this, be with him while apart. Climb that gnarly wall of fear, a treacherous drop below, and trust I was strong enough to make it. *Maybe.*

A roadie took his guitar. August leapt off the front of the stage, took one step toward me, but fans reached for him, wanting to shake his hand, pat his back. Two women hung at

his side, too close for my comfort. One whispered in his ear. The other swished her hair from side to side, fluttering her eyelashes.

That was my man. That song had been mine, angry lyrics and all.

*Who do they think they are?*

Except he wasn't mine. This was his life, a startling glimpse of the tours and shows and hungry women. A life oceans apart from mine.

My saliva turned hot and sour, pooling in my mouth. I grabbed my journal and purse, but paused and faced Finch. "Can we go for coffee sometime? I'd like to catch up."

He tapped his fingers on the bar top, considering me. "Sounds great. I'm sure the past nine years could fill at least an hour of coffee time."

And then some. "Also, my birthday is tomorrow."

"You think I don't know that date?" His raised eyebrow held an air of rebuke.

"I guess it's kind of hard to forget." The anniversary of our epic bad decision would go down in history. "Anyway, as awkward as it might be, I'm going out with August and friends and would love for you to come." For us to fully move on, not agree to a coffee encounter that might never happen.

He deflated slightly. "I'd actually love to, but I have plans. Also might be too soon for August and me."

His genuine disappointment meant as much as if he'd said yes, another part of my past knitting together. I kissed his bristly cheek. The impetuous move surprised him, judging by his slight jolt, but he smiled in earnest.

I could barely see August now, flanked by bodies. He pushed up, probably on his tiptoes, and nodded at me. A move to explain his delay. I understood, but I didn't like it. Waiting for him, being a hanger-on in his outer circle, wasn't appealing. "Let him know I'm outside," I told Finch.

Without another glance, I worked my way to the door. Fresh air was needed, along with a juicy hotdog. Food. Oxygen. Space from August and his perfect hate-love song that had me wanting to tear back into the club and drag him away from his harem of admirers.

In the end, I didn't have to. Footsteps pounded behind me as I crossed the street. August's voice followed. "Where do you think you're going?"

I kept moving, didn't face him. "You were busy."

"I was trying to get to you."

It was true. He had nodded to me. He hadn't cared for those women. Not tonight, at least. I put on a brave smile, pulled up my big girl panties, and reached for his hand.



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12:00 A.M.

24 HOURS...



## AUGUST

Instead of leading us to her car, Gwen bee-lined for the hotdog stand opposite the club, her short steps so quick I had to jog slightly to keep up. She glanced over her shoulder, leveling me with nothing but a smile. “I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.”

I was about to tell her I was hungry for her lips and her body, for the soft patch of perfection between her thighs, but there was an edge to her voice, a tightness to her smile.

Because I’d royally screwed up.

*Play her a love song, Finch had said. Tell her how you feel the best way you know how.*

I’d walked on stage, intending to do just that. Pour my feelings into lyrics. Then the lights had mellowed. The venue I’d always wanted to play had come into focus, and a sense of rightness had crested me.

Destiny.

Finch and I were on our way to mending fences. The woman of my dreams had been staring at me, stars in her eyes, hesitation flickering, too. I understood then, what needed doing. There was something about coming full circle, traveling every inch of our history, rather than flying over the ragged terrain. It meant more to sing the pain, the remorse, the hope. It meant more to live each sonorous note, the deep, resonant

sounds moving through me. It was the only way to show her I'd moved on. That now, finally, I was ready to put her first.

So I'd launched into my angriest hate-Gwen ballad, and I could have sworn she got it. Her brow had lifted and her eyes had turned soft, as though she'd understood my message.

Now she was distant.

I reinforced my grip on her hand. Distant wasn't okay. Not with our time limit. Instead of discussing our appetites, or whatever other diversions she had in mind, I said, "You're mad I sang that song."

Unperturbed by my statement, she sauntered toward the hotdog stand, her fingers feathering across my palm. Gwen, the coy seductress. Another distraction technique. A hint of slide guitar wove from the club, twining through the air in a provocative rhythm. I didn't recognize the song, but she swayed her hips, side-to-side, like the notes controlled her. Lived in her. A hot throb of lust gripped me.

That would be something, making love to her while this tune played, moving with her to the beat. I'd have to hunt it down. Blast it from speakers as we rocked together. She glanced back at me, and her cheeks pinked, like she was imagining the same scene. Her blush wasn't an act. Neither was how hard she'd been fighting our connection. She was struggling with our intensity, unsure how to hold on.

Fixated on reading the shifts in her expression, I didn't pay much attention as she ordered us a hotdog to share. I hadn't realized she'd picked up the mustard spoon until it was fisted in her hand. The little sneak smeared it on my shirt.

I dropped her hand and jumped back. "What the fuck, Gwen?"

Lips flattened to keep from laughing, she brandished her plastic weapon. "That's how I felt."

"How you felt about what?"

"You asked if I was mad you sang that song."

I held out my hands, afraid to touch my shirt and spread the bright yellow condiment. “And you felt...” I ran through my emotions just now: shocked, horrified, confused. “Oh,” I said, all irritation fading. “I see your point.”

She may have understood why I’d chosen that ballad by the end, but getting there wouldn’t have been fun.

I bit back a curse, annoyed with myself for being spontaneous. Reckless with her feelings. Instead of fighting the mustard attack, I dipped my finger in a thick blob and licked it off. Tart. Tangy. Sweet. “It’s not so bad after the fact, right?”

Her laugh finally exploded, a glorious cackle that had her doubling over. “I...” She tried to speak, but wound up wheezing and fanning her face. “You just...” Again, she dissolved. “You look ridiculous.”

We had an audience now, one woman with her phone in the air videoing us. Fabulous. That’d hit the social media circuit in no time, along with the rumor I got the shits. I should care. But I didn’t. The harder Gwen laughed, the lighter I felt. I grabbed the ketchup spoon and dashed it across her tank top. She came back at me with the mustard. I retaliated until we resembled a couple of Jackson Pollock paintings.

Gwen wailed like she’d been shot. “My boobs are bleeding.”

I snorted and she hammed up her performance.

Gwen, the drama queen.

Gwen, the light in my dark.

Gwen, the girl who owned my heart.

“I’mma have to charge you fifty cents for those spoons.” The hotdog vendor twitched his mustache, unimpressed with our antics.

Gwen gathered our weapons and dumped them in the trash. “He’s a famous musician and sings mean songs to girls. He can cover it.”

I shook my head and planted a kiss on her cheek. “Happy birthday.”

It was after midnight. Her official birthday.

“I really am the luckiest girl, getting sung hate songs and covered in ketchup on my special day. And by the way, you stink.” She cringed at my shirt, making light of the milestone in typical Gwen fashion. If she didn’t make a big deal of her birthday, she wouldn’t miss the family calls and gifts she’d never receive.

“Does this mean I’m forgiven?” I asked.

“It does.” Then more quietly, “I loved the song.”

Her soft words hit me square in the chest.

“Dog’s up,” the vendor said before I pulled her to me and mixed our ketchup and mustard stains. She had to see how perfect we were together, how there was no maybe about us, different lives or not. She at least seemed less tense.

She accepted our street meat as I paid, saucing up our snack with the works. She left off the onions, and my heart gave another twist.

This woman knew how I ate my hotdog, without even asking. She’d taken up extreme sports since we’d last hung out, had a group of amazing friends and a fulfilling career. I’d made acquaintances in new countries, had learned enough German, Italian, and French to get by. I enjoyed cooking now and walking through a market, waiting to be inspired.

We’d changed a lot the past nine years, but I knew Gwen at her core, how she loved blue jelly beans and hated mayonnaise. That she’d listened to Green Day on repeat as a teen and had to knot her shoelaces twice when tying them. A silly superstition. She knew the contents of the time capsule buried in my back yard and the origin of all my scars. She was the only person on the planet who knew I cried during *13 Going on 30*.

She’d been there for me after my mother’s nasty car accident, at the hospital the entire week that followed. I’d played guitar for her daily after she’d broken her wrist.

The little stuff. The important stuff. The things that filled the gaps of our lives.

Losing her now would be like losing my voice.

We sat on the curb while we ate, streaked in ketchup and mustard, sharing bites back and forth. It tasted amazing. Being beside her was even better, and I was done letting her hide from me. “You were right,” I said.

She licked her fingers after her last bite, then gave up and wiped them on her dirty shirt. “About what?”

“I was jumping ahead with us, scared I might lose you. I didn’t ask what you wanted or if you wanted an *us*, or how you think it might work. I wanted to do everything so you couldn’t say no.”

She rested her arms on her bent knees and stared straight ahead. “You’re a fixer, August. It’s what you do. But this isn’t a quick fix.”

Exactly what Finch had said. The more I replayed it, the more it made sense. Teaching Gwen guitar hadn’t replaced the chill in her childhood home. Bringing her to my house for dinner hadn’t made her silent meals easier to bear. They’d probably accentuated how bad she’d had it. “You don’t have to leave your job or your friends,” I said, trying to find a balance between fixer and compromiser. “We can work this long distance.”

“We have very different lives.”

“If I can guide my career to the States, I will.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“Tell me why. Talk to me.”

She picked at her nails. “You didn’t see the wreckage I was after my nineteenth birthday. I was a disaster, could barely function. It wasn’t pretty.”

I wanted to tug her to me, hold her against my chest. Her nail picking was a red flag that kept me away. “I wish I’d known.”

“No you don’t. You wouldn’t have wanted to know back then, and it’s fine. I deserved it. But how far down I spiraled scares me. What I feel for you now, barely a day together, it’s...like, *huge*.”

I nudged her knee with mine. “That’s what she said.”

She tipped her head back and chuckled. “It *is* what she said. You have a gorgeous cock.”

There was that fire again, gripping my groin. Sex wasn’t what we needed now. My lame humor probably wasn’t much help, either.

Her face sobered. “Seeing you in there, with that crowd, those eager women—I don’t know how to handle that. I want you, August, more than you know. More than for two days. But there will be stretches of time apart and all sorts of obstacles, and I have the potential to turn into a psycho girlfriend who gets clingy and weird when you’re performing for a crowd of rangy cougars. Which means we might fail. I’m ridiculously terrified of what might happen to me if we fail.”

We wouldn’t. I knew it as sure as I knew the sun would rise. I still understood her fear, how hard our years apart had been. If there was an easy solution, I’d be all over it. Demand she see us as a couple, not a fling. But there was no easy answer to be found. I felt inept. Useless. Stuck. All I could do was listen to her, be here for her the way she wanted. What if it wasn’t enough?

“So you’re not willing to try?” I asked.

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“Then what? Tell me what you need, and it’s yours.”

She touched her belly briefly, as though cradling something precious, then she reached over and grazed her fingertips down my cheek. “Time. Our seconds, like you said. No talk of relationships or future yet. I’m not ready for that.”

I gathered her hand in mine and kissed each of her knuckles. “Then that’s what you’ll get.” Even though it wasn’t what I wanted. “But I have one demand.”

“Do you, now?”

“There will be more bikini posters.” I wasn’t sure where her code for sex had originated, but saying it restored her playfulness.

She shimmied her shoulders. “That, my fine sir, will not be a problem. There will be a whole *Sports Illustrated* issue of bikini posters. Before that, though”—she gripped my thigh, excitement in her wide green eyes—“we have more PI work.”

She went on about Uncle Rex’s clue to her father’s name. *Tom or Ted*. I did my best to show surprise, but the guilt over my lie thickened my throat, mixed with all the angst broiling inside me. The urge to confess what I knew rose, but I stomped it down. It was just another thing that could sink us. Another obstacle. Another reason we might fall apart.

Because of my idiocy.

But as she spoke about her mother’s favorite drink and how Mary had danced in the club and had wanted to be on Broadway and had eaten her first hotdog, my niggling remorse lessened. Gwen had wanted a hotdog because her mother had eaten one—maybe in this very spot. A day ago, she’d never have sought that connection with Mary. She actually smiled when gushing over her mother’s first kiss, made me read the passage. (After we’d wiped the grease from our hands.) This was the right thing, not telling her what I knew.

It also brought me back to the first time her mother had proved she’d loved her daughter.

The day of Gwen’s nineteenth birthday, I’d called Mary, desperate, asking for Gwen’s address. I’d denied my feelings for Gwen too long, had needed to speak with her and figure out if I was alone in my unshakable love. I’d been worried her mother would stonewall me, brush me off. She’d never liked me hanging around her daughter.

Mary Hamilton had surprised the hell out of me with two short sentences. “Gwen loves you, August. Don’t let her push you away.”

After picking my jaw up off the floor, I'd gone out that afternoon and had bought Gwen a birthday ring, to pledge my love. To fix whatever the hell I'd broken. If her mother was pushing us together, I'd figured Gwen must have told her something. Let it slip, how she'd felt.

That story may not have had a happy ending, and I was pretty sure Gwen had never opened up to her mother. Understanding what Gwen wanted had been a mother's intuition alone.

As was Mary's recent letter to me. Her final line—*Remember what I told you on Gwen's nineteenth birthday*—had been a woman still looking out for her daughter, showing love in the only abstract way she knew how. She'd sent *me* the information about Gwen's dad, not Gwen. She'd wanted us together. She'd known how unresolved our feelings had been. Without that push, I wouldn't be here now, falling in love with Gwen all over again.

Fighting for her to give us a chance.

It didn't absolve Mary of her abysmal parenting, but she'd wanted Gwen to find her father, and to find me.

I may have ruined the father part, but I owed it to Mary to let Gwen discover her mother. Learn to love a part of her, if possible.

This was the right thing to do, for Gwen, and for Mary.



GWEN

“Will you come to a lookout point with me?” I was too buzzed to quit following clues. I could barely sit still.

“You trying to take advantage of me, Possum?”

A tempting notion. One I would indulge in later. For now I couldn't stop picturing a young Mary Hamilton eating hot dogs and having her first kiss. “My mother mentioned a place

in her journal—a lookout called Tank Hill, which I’ve heard of but never visited. It just feels right, to keep following in her footsteps. It led us here, to Finch and you guys talking. And —”

“You covering me in mustard?”

“It really was tonight’s highlight.” Joking with August was the highlight. The lightness allowed me to live in the moment. The here and now. Keep my mind from running ten steps ahead.

He pinched his defiled black T-shirt and pulled it away from his chest. “Maybe we should change first.”

The stains on my tank top had begun drying, and I smelled like a hotdog, but tonight was all about momentum. We had twenty-four hours until my birthday was over. The deadline rolled closer, taunting me. “I don’t care if you don’t.”

He shrugged and released his shirt. “Then let’s move out.”

We bickered during the drive. I knew the fastest way to Twin Peaks Boulevard; he thought his way was better. Men were naïve like that, and I was verging on giddy. The hysterical kind of silly unleashed when a slew of untapped emotions engulfed you. It was an epidemic.

A bubble of happiness built along with my delirium. It rippled while we argued. Another ballooned when I elbowed August, and he elbowed me back. It grew when we laughed and fake-sneered and rolled our eyes at each other. There were a lot of floating bubbles filling my chest. I didn’t try to pop them or pretend playfully arguing with August didn’t fill my car with joy. These were my seconds, and I’d savor every one.

We grabbed the flashlight from my glove compartment and hiked up the steep stairs to the hilltop. Our beam of light skipped over roots and logs, skimming the few trees and bushes growing on this stretch of earth. A swing hung from a tall branch, the lights of the city beyond. We stood on the precipice, the flashlight switched off, the backs of our hands brushing.

Darkness cocooned us.

I listened for August's breath, the even in-out of his lungs. Imagined his chest rising and shrinking. I matched my inhales to his.

"It's beautiful," he whispered.

"Like an alien city. No traffic. No noise." Perfect stillness.

We exhaled slowly. My world shrank to this moment. No before or after or morning or night. Just now.

"It's because Barbie-Man lives there," he said. "Keeps the criminals in check."

I shuddered. "Barbie-Man was, and always will be, an abhorrent mutation. Way to kill my moment."

His lips found my cheek in the dark. His heartbeat found mine in the shrinking space between us. "Does this make it better?"

I tried to say yes, but only managed a sigh.

He flicked the flashlight back on and led me to the large swing. It was wide and flat, a wood plank big enough to share. We crammed together and trained the light on my mother's journal. Stars shone down, the night warm and still. He shifted against me, a squirmy move as he yanked off his shirt and tossed it on the ground. The soft glow of the flashlight draped his body in sharp relief—the ridges of his abs, the firm cut of his pecs and shoulders.

My mouth dried. "Are you about to teach me pole vaulting?"

"Say the word, and I will. But the smell was getting to me."

A valid point. The ketchup whiffs from my tank top weren't exactly pleasant. Taking his lead, I squeezed the journal between my thighs and freed my hands to whip off my top and toss it near his.

"Jesus, Gwen. We're in public." His voice sounded scratchy.

“We’re in a dark place at one a.m., not a soul around. And wearing a bra isn’t any different than wearing a bikini top.”

He still groaned. There was no denying the sexual energy pillowing around us. It was always there, whether bickering or breathing or sharing a swing. I was in jeans and my favorite Victoria’s Secret black bra. The one that gave my girls a lift. August’s hand coasted over my back, crisscrossing the silky straps. My nipples pebbled. Shivers danced along my skin. Dirt rolled under our feet as we swayed.

I wanted to tug him to the ground, lose the rest of our clothes, but I wanted this, too. To sit with him under a star-filled sky, my history unfolding as the night wore on.

I found where I’d closed my mother’s diary last and read her words. “The lookout is our place. No one is ever there. We lie on a blanket and he tells me about the stars and the shapes he sees. He kisses me tenderly, like I’m a secret he’s unlocking. But last night, it finally happened. I had waited so long. He had been so patient. I’m not a virgin anymore.”

August inhaled sharply. I should have been horrified to read about my mother popping her cherry. Like *hum songs and cover my eyes* horrified.

Instead I hunched farther over her journal, devouring her private words. “It hurt at first, like he said it would. Then it was good. He felt so good. We moved together in the best kind of dance. I wrapped my legs around him. He told me I was beautiful, that I make him feel alive. He said it while he was inside me, moving deep and slow. I tried to say something, to tell him he was the reason the sun rose, but I couldn’t find the words. They caught in my throat. The second I tried, tears threatened. I have never known this. How a person can make you so happy you want to cry. And I couldn’t risk it. He would think I’m too young for crying. A baby. He may be older, but we are the same. Age doesn’t matter. Not with us. Not after what we did.”

My voice had thinned to a whisper, my mother’s love life stealing my breath. My giddiness absconded, too. He was an older man, this Tom or Ted. He seemed to have fallen for my

mother. Yet Uncle Rex had mentioned another woman on the hunt for him. A jilted girlfriend? An angry one-night stand? As unsettling as those possibilities were, this diary entry provided...peace.

I'd once asked my mother, after her cancer diagnosis, when I'd realized she could die before telling me my father's name, if she'd been assaulted. If that was why she'd refused to give me this scrap of information. It had plagued me, the possibility that I'd come from something dark, but I'd finally found the courage to ask.

Her reply had been straightforward but cryptic. "You were born of love," she'd said flatly. "But love is often blind."

That had been the most detail I'd ever learned about my father. I had pushed back, begged for more information. She had stonewalled me and played her Cancer Card. Would claim she was tired and needed to lie down when I'd go over. We'd fought on and off after that, because I couldn't let it go, to the point she'd asked me to stop visiting.

There had been no magical mending of our relationship when she'd gotten sick. My anger toward her had intensified, for what she'd withheld—affection, information. She would close her eyes when I'd enter her room.

She died suddenly, a month after our last interaction. I hadn't been by her bed, holding her hand. I hadn't cried at her funeral. Her parents hadn't shown up. With no phone number or return address on my old birthday cards, I'd had no way to reach my aunt. I organized Mary's house on my own, had packed her life into boxes, but I never mourned.

Something moved through me as I sat here, her journal in my hand, her potent love for this man seeping from her words. A sob moved up my throat. "I'm sorry," I said to no one and everyone. To her. To August. To the father I didn't know. "I'm sorry I ruined your life."

It came out as a snotty, phlegmy sound, the words running together. Giddy one second, snotty the next. This day had been nothing but a rollercoaster, and I was about ready to get off.

August removed the journal from my trembling hand, led us to a soft dirt patch. He lay on his back and cradled me against his chest. He made shushing sounds as he stroked my hair and let me cry. I clung to him, my salty tears sliding over his collarbone.

He tucked me closer. "I'm here, baby. Let it out."

And I did. It wasn't pretty. It was loud and hiccupy, and off-the-charts unattractive. My mother had been so alive before having me. Hopeful. Spirited. She'd loved this man deeply. I didn't have proof he was my father, but a sureness formed as I grieved: a strange connection to these words and this spot, maybe where I'd been conceived.

"I never said goodbye to her," I finally managed. "She died thinking I hated her."

"No, she didn't."

"But I did hate her. I was awful to her. We were awful to each other. The word love wasn't in her vocabulary."

"She loved you, Gwen. In her own twisted way, she loved you. You were always in her thoughts."

He spoke with such confidence, as though he knew something I didn't. As though she'd told him as much. It didn't matter. What was done was done. I had her journal now, a window into the girl she'd once been. I was also sure I'd find my father. The bigger piece. The more important connection.

The flashlight was still on, shining away from us. August was a warm stamp in the near darkness, a solid shape holding me together. We were both covered in earth, the dry ground smeared on our jeans, dusting our skin. I splayed my palm over his abdomen. "I made you dirty again."

It was easier to focus on dirt and the slow pulse spinning through my belly than swirling regrets.

He shifted lower, tipped up my chin. Soft lips landed on my nose, both my eyelids. He kissed my tear-streaked cheeks. The rise and fall of his chest slowed. It stopped. "Gwen, I..."

There was trepidation in his tone, his unfinished “I” dangling between us.

*I love you.* Is that what he was about to say? What he’d promised he wouldn’t do? *I love yous* came with expectations and a future and all the things I wasn’t ready to discuss.

A girl couldn’t face her Worst Terrible Fuck-up, her dead mother’s diary, and a phantom father, all while fighting to maintain her sanity in the face of a possible *I love you* from the one who got away, when he’d be leaving in two short days. No. Not two days. It was one day now. My birthday was today.

August was leaving tomorrow morning, because tomorrow was today. *God.*

These seconds needed to slow the fuck down. Stop. Go in reverse.

Terrified he was about to say the three most terrifying words in the English language, I opened my ridiculous mouth, and blurted, “I stole your underwear.”

Gwen Hamilton, winner of the Dumbest Confession Award.



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1:00 A.M.

23 HOURS...



## AUGUST

I wiggled my hips in my jeans, but my briefs were still on. They hadn't magically disappeared. "Explain yourself, Possum."

"Nothing. Forget I said it." Gwen dashed at her drying tears.

"Forget you said that you stole my underwear? On what planet would that happen?"

"Uranus."

I barked out a laugh. One minute ago, my lungs had ceased to function. I'd been a second from telling Gwen I had a letter from her mother, proof the woman had cared about her and wanted to see her happy, which would have led to her father's name, and that I'd lied by omission, and had been letting her chase a ghost.

Now I was laughing. "As nice as I'm sure Uranus is, we're on Earth. And on Earth women don't get away with saying things like 'I stole your underwear' without—"

I stopped midsentence, a sudden flash of my lucky boxers, the black ones with the green four-leaf clovers, stripping my voice. The ones I'd worn to every soccer match. The ones that had mysteriously disappeared my senior year. "You stole my lucky underwear."

“No I didn’t. You heard me wrong. I said I stole your honey bear.”

“My honey bear?”

“The one your mom kept in the kitchen. The jar thingy with the weird fake apron, where you put your keys and stuff.”

“My keys and stuff?”

“The honey bear!”

I flipped us, straddling her waist from above. The flashlight beamed across her panicked face. She was so not getting away with this. “You have five seconds before I tickle the shit out of you.”

“You want me to shit on you? I’m into experimenting, August, but defecation doesn’t do it for me.”

I full on snorted that time. It was still her funeral.

“*Fivefourthreetwoone.*” I dug in, tickling her ribs mercilessly while she screeched and flailed and tried to toss me off her. She didn’t deserve the full five-second countdown. Not if she’d stolen my treasured boxers. She was also unbelievably strong. Her toned arms and legs strained against me. My cock strained against my jeans.

Goddamn, did she have a killer body.

I was a second from losing my grip on her, when she cried, “Beetlejuice!”

Our safe word. Dammit.

Keeping her locked between my thighs, I released her ribs. We both panted. The panting made me horny(er). I circled her upper arms in a vise-like grip. “What did you do with them?”

She slackened, her limbs turning to noodles. “We hadn’t spoken in months, because I’d ghosted on you, and I kind of, *maybe*, one day snuck into your room and might have smelled your shirts and lay on your bed.”

That was one hell of a visual. Gwen Hamilton in my childhood bed, tangled in my sheets. “You’re worried about

me being into kinky defecation sex, and you're an admitted boxer sniffer? I might need to rethink things between us."

"Your *shirts*, dummy. I said I smelled your shirts. The boxers were a spontaneous moment of criminal masterminding. I hid them in my underwear drawer."

"So our undies could mingle?"

"Something like that."

"Oh, baby," I cooed, enjoying her torment. "That's so sweet."

She mumbled something under her breath and kicked her feet like a petulant child. "I am now sufficiently embarrassed. You can let me up."

Except I had her right where I wanted her, under the night sky, tears no longer streaking her face. I hated seeing her cry, but being here for her, to hold her—it meant the world. Being with her while she uncovered her mother's history was important.

When the time was right, I'd tell Gwen about her mother's letter, *after* we'd followed more clues. Without a last name, she'd never actually find her father. There was no way for her to know I'd visited his house. Not now, at least. Down the road, when we had more time, once she'd discovered all she could about Mary Hamilton, I'd tell her the truth. Giving Gwen these hours with her mother's memory meant more.

I also knew how to keep her happy.

A thin strip of light cut across the sleek plane of her stomach. Her bra did phenomenal things for her breasts, but they'd look so much better bare and in my mouth. "There's punishment for being a pervy boxer stealer, Gwen."



*Gwen*

August was on me in seconds, his lips working their magic. My embarrassment fled. My sanity fled. My clothes needed to flee.

I pressed my fingers into the knobs of his spine. His muscles shifted, strong and coiled with each purposeful movement. He nudged my knees as we kissed, anchoring himself between my thighs. *Right there*. He rolled his hips and I rocked into him, my whole body clenching. We were at it again, dry-fucking like kids, this time at a stereotypical lookout.

He wrenched his lips away. “I had no idea you were so kinky.”

“There’s lots you don’t know about me.”

“I plan to learn it all.”

The comment skimmed close to future talk, but a twig or something scratched at my back, the line of his cock pressing exactly where I ached. I couldn’t do anything but *feel*. “Can we do this learning while fucking?”

“That can be arranged.” Another thrust of his hips, and desire snapped through me.

I dragged my hands over the grooves of his back, circled his biceps, traced his collarbones, slipped my fingers into the dip at the base of his neck. “We should stop. Anyone could come up here.”

He lowered his chest to mine, slowly, inch by inch. Warm skin. Firm muscle. He cradled my head in his hand, protecting me from the hard ground below. “You said yourself it was dark and empty. And I thought you craved adrenaline?”

“Is that what this is?”

“Oh, Possum. This is way more than adrenaline.”

He was sneaky, hinting at the truth behind my bravado. He wasn’t wrong. This was August and me, half-naked on a dark hilltop, enough history between us to fill an encyclopedia.

Instead of fighting the depths of my emotions or making a joke, I stared at him through the cover of night, wondering if

he could see the extent of my feelings. They burned so bright I was surprised a blast of light didn't blind us.

"Now. I want you now." I didn't recognize the desperation in my voice.

A masculine sound pushed from the back of his throat, and his lips bruised mine—a hard, hot kiss that gripped the tips of my curled toes. His tongue delved into my mouth, seeking mine, sliding roughly. Our bodies writhed, hands and lips and teeth everywhere.

Need became hunger; hunger became a frenzy. I didn't care where we were or worry about who could stumble upon us. The darkness gave me a sense of security as he stripped off my jeans. It allowed me to pretend we were in another time and place where airplanes didn't separate lovers. Where clocks could be silenced.

For tonight, we were limitless.

Removing his jeans took too long and only reached his knees again. I'd never had sex like this, the pushing, pulling, grunting kind where the need to join was such sweet agony. We were insane for each other. He rotated me on top of him, anchored my hips as he pushed into me from below. Again, there was no time for foreplay. No time to explore the landscape of his body, every valley, plain, and ridge I'd been denied. Too many years had been stolen from us.

Urgency colored his gravelly voice. "I'm gonna come in you, Gwen. So fucking hard. You're mine. You're so fucking mine."

The permanence of him in my body was undeniable, a deep imprint every time our hips slapped. The sense of belonging was overwhelming, like every hardship could be overcome as long as I had August with me, telling me I was his.

How would that work when he was oceans away?

I banished that uncertainty to the darkness around us, focused on our limitless cocoon. I rode my man, my bra still on, the night air caressing my skin, wringing every drop of

pleasure I could. Soaring. Falling. Flying. Divine thickness, hard inside me.

There was no adrenaline rush better than making love to August Cruz.

I planted my palms on his chest. “I’ll need new kneecaps by the time we’re done.”

“I’ll kiss them better,” he grunted.

I ground against him, delicious circles that rubbed me just right. “Your cock is fucking fantastic.”

“Being inside you is a fucking dream.”

“We say fuck a lot when we fuck.”

“Because it’s so fucking good.”

Good was an understatement. We were transcendental. I wanted to learn his body, each lick and bite that earned me a growl. Each shift of my hips that made him swear. Yet he was leaving me. *Stop*, I ordered my mind. *Stop freaking out*. I worked my body harder, held on tighter, my nails tasting his flesh as the edges of my orgasm bloomed.

“I’m close, Gwen. So damn close. I want you to come all over my dick.”

His dirty words enflamed my desire as he filled me, his length dragging against me in exquisite torture. I’d normally touch myself to go the last mile, to *chase, chase, chase* the burning ball at the end of this ride. But there was no pursuing this release.

It yanked me under, a sharp tug that splintered through me. I clenched and called his name. More *fucks* fell from my lips. The stars fell around me.

August dug his thumbs into my hips, holding me slightly higher, thrusting up into me in hard, fast strokes. His mouth was open, his eyes black in the darkness. “Fuck, Gwen. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Oh, *fuck*.”

He jerked and shuddered, one last drive impaling me to the point of pain, but the best kind. The thoroughly used kind. The

kind that eased into bliss as I sank on top of him.

“That was five fucks. For a man who writes songs, your verbiage seems limited.”

He held me to him, his length still nestled deep. Breathing hard, he pressed my face into his neck and kissed the top of my head. “Making love to you could rebuild worlds. It could part oceans. Drop the stars from the sky. Making love to you is my reason why.”

This man was a triple threat. “That was cheesy”—I kissed his neck, his jaw, his lips—“and I loved it.” *I love you*, I wanted to say. There was no denying it. It had always been August for me. It also didn’t change what tomorrow would bring.

I tried to reel my emotions back in, but it was like rewinding a ball of yarn, the shape never quite right again, always threatening to unravel. I also couldn’t ignore what I’d just experienced. “I want to stay like this all night,” I said, taming my freakout.

He clamped his hands on my ass, keeping himself seated inside me. “Might be weird when people show up in the morning.”

“It could be great for your career. No such thing as bad publicity, right?”

“Considering the rumors that likely got started today, I’m hoping the answer to that is yes. But”—he rocked me against his pelvis—“I’m still dying to get you on a proper bed and take my time with you. I haven’t tasted you yet. I need that like I need to breathe.”

Whoa, boy. I wouldn’t take much convincing, but I didn’t want to leave yet. We’d had sex where my mother and father had made love. Where I might have been conceived. I wasn’t ready to walk away from my bone-deep connection here. The first place I’d grieved for my mother. “Can we look at the stars for a while first? I’d like to read a bit more of the journal, too.”

He ran his nose through my hair, stealing a scent with each pass. “Anything, Possum.”

We got dressed, the two of us ridiculous in our condiment-streaked clothing. We lay on the ground, diary and flashlight in hand, reading my mother's heart.

She'd loved her man. She'd hated her parents. It sounded all too familiar. She mentioned a vacation with her guy, a sneaky trip camouflaged to her parents as a church excursion. Hozier's "Take Me to Church" came to mind, and a whole lot of "taking." It could have been where her luggage had gone missing, but it wasn't the final entry and didn't explain the eleven-year gap between being packed and riding a Greyhound.

A few lines about trust also gave me pause.

*I didn't think I would trust anyone after Marcus. I didn't think I would ever date again. But Ted is a man, not a boy. He is different. He wouldn't hurt me like that. He better not hurt me.*

Wariness bled through her words. Distrust. After August read the passage, I relayed Uncle Rex's comment to him, how some girl had come looking for Ted or Tom. "If my mother had been betrayed by this Marcus guy before, she'd be wary of it again. It would hurt worse a second time."

"It likely would."

"Right, but...if this new guy got her pregnant, and she later found out he was seeing someone, don't you think she'd flip?"

August paused, but didn't offer much insight. "That kind of betrayal would cut deep, for sure."

His lack of rebuttal annoyed me. As teens, we'd pick apart clues, him more than me, always analyzing, figuring, solving. I wanted to do the same now. He seemed distracted. With all we had on our plate, I couldn't hold it against him. But my mind whirred, questions and possibilities spinning.

I wasn't sure a cheating boyfriend was enough to embitter my mother, unplanned pregnancy or not. Flat out refusing to

share my father's identity seemed too extreme, but she'd been a kid with no parental assistance. It was possible.

Without August's analytical mind to bounce ideas with, I read on. Her tone resumed its previous swooniness, especially when mentioning a bench they'd visited at Fisherman's Wharf. "We should go tomorrow," I told August. "After I meet the girls at the gym."

The bench in question had supposedly been inscribed with my mother's name, a rebellious scratching into wood she'd done instead of doodling in a notebook margin. The kind where you wrote your boyfriend's last name as your own.

Possibly my father's last name.

If she had, it was the key to finding him. With that clue, I could narrow the possibilities and visit each man. I didn't mention the last-name detail to August. He didn't seem keen to obsess over this as much as me, and it felt too fragile: a wish only possible if kept private. I also needed to talk with Ainsley and Rachel about this insane night. Specifically how I wanted to handcuff myself to August and never let him out of my sight.

"I'll take the guys up on their run offer," August said. "We'll hook up after."

I snuggled in closer. "That means we'll be apart for a bit."

One arm latched around me, he dragged his boot heel over the loose dirt. "I'll miss you."

Raw, simple honesty.

He deserved the same in return. "I'll miss you, too." And it would only be a few hours. Not days or weeks or months.

A shiver ran through me.

He rubbed his hand down my arm. "You cold?"

I wished it were the cold. I rested the journal on my belly, needing to talk and drown the shouty voices in my head. "What's your favorite part about touring?"

He played with my hair. “Singing. Unleashing everything into song.”

“And the worst?”

“It’s lonely.”

I ached at his desolate tone. I’d always imagined him surrounded by people, busy and smiling. I’d assumed his life was fuller and happier than mine, like when we’d been kids. The greener grass that was more AstroTurf than natural growth. “Aren’t you close with your band?”

“They’re good guys, but we don’t stick together. I’ve used studio musicians for different stretches of the tour. People come and go, and outside the music scene, no one really knows me. It’s not all bad. The solitude is great for writing. The venues I play are usually full, packed with music fans there to listen. I get paid doing what I love.”

It was one thing watching him play that hate-love song tonight. The possibility of watching him in concert, entertaining a smoky European club, had me itching to hop on a flight with him. To be his person who filled his lonely moments. Such a tempting idea. “Do you always play ‘Girl with the Black Heart’?”

A light laugh moved through his chest. “People go nuts over that song, but I’ll play the newer version now.”

“People are sick and twisted,” I grumbled.

“Maybe I’ll write a new song. Something cheesy. Just for you.”

“You know I like my music loud and screamy.”

He pinched my shoulder. “You also like to take the long route when we could have driven here faster, if you’d listened to me.”

I pinched him back. Because he was wrong. We kept joking, sharing. He talked about the roads in Europe and how wild the driving there was. We’d for sure murder each other navigating that madness. He confessed he missed his parents, who’d moved to Chicago for his father’s consulting work. His

sister, Melody, was a high school music teacher there, all three Cruz kids drawn to the music industry in one way or another.

I explained the intricacies of my job, then he peppered me with questions about surfing and mountain biking and jumping from planes. I barely got one answer out before he shot out another. The night drew on, my eyes grew heavy. He hummed a soft tune.

I hadn't planned to fall asleep here, but my languid limbs wouldn't move. He hummed some more, I pressed closer. All I'd learned about my mother and her boyfriend—*my father*, my gut told me—looped through my mind, puzzle pieces jumbling together. He'd watched her dance, had taken her to clubs and for fast-food dinners. He'd lain with her below the stars and had treated her with respect when taking her virginity. He'd loved her. I was sure of it.

Would he really have cheated on her? Unless it had been the reverse. She could have been the other woman, an escape for him, true love he didn't have in another relationship. The possibility wouldn't excuse the deceit. Or maybe the girl who'd searched him out at the Blue-Eyed Raven had been a friend or coworker, a close relative.

The only clarity was August's steadiness below me, and that this journal could lead me to my father and the answers I craved. In the light of day. Before my birthday was over. Exactly as I'd wished. No other outcome was acceptable. Not when August was leaving and the only thing that could save me from that impending heartache was finding my dad.



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6:00 A.M.

18 HOURS...



## AUGUST

Gwen covered her mouth with her hand and spoke through her fingers. “I want to kiss you, but I can taste my breath. It could kill a small country.”

“You think I care? Mine’s just as bad.” I stalked toward her until her back was pressed against her apartment’s brick exterior. Her place was a few floors up. I wasn’t leaving without a kiss.

“If you don’t care, there’s something wrong with you.”

I caged her between my hands but was smart enough to keep my hips back. Already, I was hard. Primed for her. If my body brushed hers, I’d be dragging her upstairs and neither of us would see our friends today. Not an unpleasant prospect.... “There’s something wrong with me, all right. I’m crazy for the girl who stole my boxers.”

“They look better on me.” Still with her hand over her mouth.

“Stop being so adorable and kiss me. We both drank water. It dilutes the morning breath. Or we can stand like this for the rest of our lives, like those street mimes who never move. I’ll paint you red and me yellow.”

Like our shirts.

We’d woken up with the sun, tangled together, smelling like ass (aka ketchup, mustard, dirt, and sex). My body had

ached from sleeping on the hard ground. My heart ached every time Gwen glanced at me. My flight was at 8:10 a.m. tomorrow, which meant I had to be at the airport by 5:30. Not enough hours from now. I needed every kiss I could get. “Give in, Possum. You know I never back down.”

She rolled her eyes, and I pressed a soft kiss to her hand, as though it weren't covering her lips. I gave it a lick and she squealed. Fast as lightning, she jerked her palm away, planted a close-lipped kiss to my mouth, then darted under my arm. I'd take what I could get.

The street was quiet, the few morning devotees either jogging or zombie-walking toward the nearest coffee joint. When she reached her building's entrance, she paused and faced me. She smoothed her hands down the sides of her slim jeans.

As though on a spring, she hopped forward, back toward me, dodging a zombie along the way. She kept enough distance between us that she didn't cover her mouth. “I just wanted to say, because I don't think I did, that I couldn't have done this without you. If you hadn't shown up at my mother's, I wouldn't have known Finch was at that club. I probably wouldn't have spoken with Uncle Rex. The ballet teacher wouldn't have given me the time of day.”

She was all fizz and bubbles, but the air in my lungs turned flat. It was one thing to keep Mary's letter and what I'd learned from Gwen. I didn't need her thanking me.

She twisted her fingers together. My insides corkscrewed into a violent knot.

“You're part of the reason I'm going to meet my father,” she went on. “I want you with me when I knock on his door. If he's amazing or awful, I want you there. Which means we need to find him today, before my birthday and your flight. And I didn't mention it, but my mom wrote that she'd scratched her name into a bench at Fisherman's Wharf. The one by the Alcatraz booth? A romantic etching, you know, using his last name instead of her own—cute teenage hopes of marriage or whatever. If it's still there, and the bench hasn't

been cleaned up or replaced, it's all we need. I'll be able to find him."

She took one step back, then two. Her cheeks glowed brighter. "But not before I brush my teeth and tell the girls about our night together."

Her departing wink was equal parts fun and naughty, exactly what I wanted for our last day, but my heartbeat became sluggish. My posture sank. I watched her slip into her building, disappear down the corridor.

I stood. I stared. I nearly retched.

If Gwen's mom had scratched *Mary Mercer* into that bench and Gwen traced it to her father's house, I couldn't return there and continue this lie, pretend I hadn't talked with his widow. That would be relationship suicide, and I never believed Gwen would get there. Not in two days. But the possibility of her discovering that last name, the coincidences that had led us here...

This had the potential to go very south, very fast.

I could derail her search, beat her to that bench and scratch out his last name if it was there. It wouldn't be hard.

It would also be active sabotage. No way was that happening. That left telling Gwen the truth, confessing I was the reason she'd never meet Ted Mercer.

Another impossible option.



"August!" Jimmy growled from behind me. "Slow the fuck down before I have a heart attack."

My thighs screamed with each long stride, my pounding feet reverberating in my skull. I'd hoped my run with the guys would give me clarity, an option beyond my two excruciating choices. All I had was a side cramp and smarting shins. Sweat dripped off my forehead.

I slowed to a jog, my lungs working harder as I lost momentum. My chest felt ready to rupture. A session with my guitar would have been better than trying to chase away my guilt.

After I'd walked in on Gwen and Finch nine years ago, I'd played guitar until my fingers had bled, literally. I couldn't get the visual of him in his boxers out of my head, kept picturing them in bed together. I'd felt so stupid. Angry at Gwen's mom for suggesting I had a chance with her, furious at Finch for abusing my trust. Sickened that I still yearned for Gwen. Even with my hardened calluses, I worked the fretboard so harshly, my skin broke.

I itched for that same pain now, but my favorite Gibson was in Germany. Where my life was. Where I'd end up alone and scratching my heartbreak into lyrics if I botched this.

The boys and I had run a circuit through Owen's neighborhood, ending in a park. Owen planted his hands on his hips, head tipped back as he caught his breath. Jimmy walked in circles, cursing me for setting the frantic pace. I yanked off my drenched shirt, could practically squeeze out the sodden fabric. I squeezed my fists instead.

It was a Sunday. Families were playing on a jungle gym, balls and Frisbees tossed. Dogs kept time with their owners. Everyone with normal lives. I didn't envy their nine-to-fives and daily routines, assuming most of them walked that treadmill, but I envied how they lounged and laughed like they had forever. Living their lives with their loved ones. With their kids.

Another stitch cramped my side.

"Mind telling me what you were chasing out there?" Jimmy stopped pacing. He sat his ass on the grass, under the shade of a large oak, arms dangling over his bent knees. "This was supposed to be a leisurely morning run. Not a sprint."

"I have stuff going on."

"Yeah, I figured that out. You've been scowling so hard *my* teeth ache."

I loosened my always working jaw, dragged my hand through my sweaty hair.

Owen sucked back a large breath, exhaled as he studied the blue sky. More blue. So much blue in San Francisco compared to Europe. I had missed this. I'd missed being able to run with friends, even though we hadn't said a word while pounding the pavement, the type of comfortable silence that allowed you to brood or think or not feel so alone.

Silence that settled the soul.

It wasn't helping much today.

Owen's shirt joined mine in a heap. He stretched his long body out next to Jimmy, hands behind his head like he was lounging at a pool. "I'm guessing the mood is because of Gwen."

I couldn't sit on the grass. My blood still rushed from our run, my mind as busy. I jammed my toe into the ground. "Because of her and something shitty I did."

"Isn't she the one who slept with your brother?" A shaft of sunlight cut through the leaves, slashing across Jimmy's tattooed arms.

I appreciated his candor. It was why I'd blurted our sordid history when we'd met for drinks. No point pretending that shit show hadn't happened. But this was worse than Gwen drowning her sorrows in Finch, and Finch using her to get to me.

This was unforgivable.

"What Gwen did sucked, but it was years ago. We've changed since then. We've talked it out, and I've forgiven her. The real kind of forgiveness, like I know I can really let it go."

"So you guys had a good night together?"

My queasiness persisted. That didn't keep me from smiling. "We had a great night. Most of it, at least." The frantic sex on her living room floor. The frantic sex on a patch of dirt in the middle of the night. Talking to her until we both fell asleep, her warm body tucked into mine. A great fucking

night. “Unfortunately, this is about a letter I got from her mother before Mary passed away. Something I haven’t told Gwen.”

One big, massive thing.

Owen squinted at me through the sun. “Lay it on us. We’ve both been through rough times with Ainsley and Rachel. We know what it’s like to screw up and almost lose the one. Assuming that’s how you feel about Gwen.”

The ebbing of my adrenaline had me dizzy. Or maybe it was thoughts of Gwen. “She’s it for me. She’s freaking out because I go back to Germany tomorrow. I’m losing it, too. Hate the idea of being apart for a second.” Even now, my senses felt dulled. The way a shorted guitar pickup deadened the ringing notes. Without her, everything was muted and worries invaded my mind. Was she talking to the girls, telling them she couldn’t keep seeing me? Talking herself out of us?

Fresh sweat beaded. The cold, clammy kind. “I’m not willing to lose her, but I did something stupid. If she finds out, she’ll probably cut me off.”

“You’d be preaching to the choir,” Owen said. “I mean, Jimmy screwed up way worse than me. Not even sure Rachel should have forgiven him.”

Jimmy kicked Owen’s shin. “Asshole.”

“She’s way out of your league.”

“Tell me something I don’t know. And I’ll warn you upfront,” Jimmy told me, “Ainsley gets scarier when you hurt her friends. I’d hire a bodyguard.”

An adoring grin swept across Owen’s face. “Love my girl.”

And I loved mine. A smack-down, hook-line-and-sinker, irreversible love. She didn’t want to hear it, though, had asked me to keep things light. Our blasted seconds—my stupid suggestion when I’d been high from making love to her our first time.

It didn't change how I felt. Or what I did. "If Ainsley finds out what I've kept from Gwen, I might have to join the Witness Protection Program."

Jimmy yanked grass from the ground and peeled the blades. "Sit down, already. Your pacing's making me nervous."

I hadn't realized I'd been on the move. I couldn't run from what I'd done or play it away in a song. I sat in a sunny spot, hoping the heat would ease the chill slipping down my spine. "You guys know how Gwen never knew her father?" They nodded, and I forged on. "Gwen's mother sent me a letter a month before she died, two months ago now. In it, she wrote Gwen's father's name. For some reason she wanted me to tell Gwen, asked me to be there for her when she found him."

I didn't mention Mary's subtle reminder to recall our conversation on Gwen's nineteenth birthday. *Gwen loves you. Don't let her push you away.* I wasn't sure it was in my control anymore.

Owen sat up slightly, leaned on his forearms. "But Gwen said you guys were going to look for him, like she didn't know who he was."

"Gwen doesn't know about the letter."

Both guys winced. Jimmy opened his mouth, probably to tell me I was a jackass.

I talked over him. "My past with Gwen was intense for me, and getting that letter brought it all back. I didn't think I could handle facing her. I was away, touring. Figured twenty-eight years had gone by, what difference would another month or two make? Then her mother died. I missed the funeral. Made some excuses to myself about concerts I'd booked, but I was dazed at that point, unsure I could deal with seeing Gwen, facing everything that had been stirred up."

"Why not tell her now?" Jimmy quit peeling grass. He had an intensity about him, like at the bar last night, when he'd asked me to leave if I'd shown up to provoke Gwen. "Why search out a man when you already know his name?"

However things unfolded with Gwen and me—if we wound up together but I was away, or if she cut me from her life—I was happy she had her girlfriends and these guys. People who supported her.

Hopefully they knew her well enough to tell me the smart thing to do. “I decided to look him up before telling Gwen, to make sure he wasn’t some deadbeat who’d hurt her or use her for cash. I realized I couldn’t keep stalling and booked a flight a week ago. I found the man’s house, knocked on the door. And...”

I dug the heels of my hands into my eyes until they burned. “I found out he had a heart attack. The week prior. I sat on that information for *seven weeks*. If I told Gwen right away, like her mother had asked, she’d have had seven weeks to get to know the man, ask all the questions she’s built up. You have no idea how big of a gap that’s been in her life. We used to spend days searching for him as kids, hours on the internet. I knew it was massive for her, and I waited because I was too big of a pussy to face her, and now she’ll never meet her father.”

“Jesus.” The intensity in Jimmy’s face turned contemplative. The idiot smirked. “That’s way worse than my fuck-up with Rachel.”

“And that’s supposed to help me how?” I picked at my calluses.

He returned to playing with the grass. “So you’re afraid she’ll cut you loose when she finds out.”

It was a statement. The obvious fact. But not the only one. “Partly. I wasn’t prepared for what I felt when I saw her after so long. And the way she looked at me?”

My overheated blood pumped faster than when on our run. “None of it went how I planned. Her mother’s luggage turned up, and she was overwhelmed. It felt like we’d been brought together for something bigger, and the journal’s been insane. Gwen’s mother was a piece of work, but we’ve seen new sides of her through her words, and it’s like Gwen’s finally discovering a woman she can understand. She’s grieving for

her for the first time, and if I tell her, she'll stop searching for her dad. Stop learning about her mother. So, no, it's not just about me. She needs this closure in her life."

Owen hadn't said a word, his brown eyes hazy, as though he'd tuned us out.

Jimmy was back to glaring. "Bullshit."

"Excuse me?"

"That's bullshit and you know it. You love her, man. You love her and you're scared you'll lose her when she finds out."

"I'm terrified, but—"

"No buts about it. I get why you delayed telling her initially. I probably would have done the same. But now? You're traipsing around the city, searching for a dead man, and you think it's because you want her to have closure? You are seriously delusional. And forget smallpox. If Ainsley gets a whiff of this, she'll castrate you."

A soccer ball bounced toward us. Jimmy shook his head at me, his damp black hair a ratty tangle. In one move, he palmed the stray ball and hopped to his feet, jogging toward a few kids messing around.

Owen stirred and sat up cross-legged. "You know I was raised by my nana, right?" I nodded. His eyes still looked glazed, his mind elsewhere. "I didn't talk about it much when we played soccer and hung out, but I never knew my father, and my mother left us when we were kids."

"Sounds rough."

"It was, at times. But I'm acquainted with feeling adrift, not understanding who you are or where you come from. It drove a lot of my choices growing up—sticking with a marriage too long as an adult, pushing Ainsley away when I should have held on tighter. I get why this has been a big void in Gwen's life, but Jimmy's only partly right."

"The part about me being delusional?"

He huffed out a laugh. "We all are when we're falling in love. No two ways about it. The emotion gets too big to see

right. But you're not wrong about the closure part for Gwen. My brother held onto more anger than I did after our mother took off. It beat him down. Understanding why she left would have gone a long way to helping him live a fuller life sooner. Maybe I wouldn't have married the wrong woman. So I get it, why you've waited. But everything has a way of getting out eventually. If you don't control that information, the fallout is way worse." The stuttering of his Adam's apple suggested he was speaking from experience.

"If I burn the letter, she'd never know."

"True. But you would."

As teens we'd drink beers under the bleachers after practice, hit on girls, talk shit about the other soccer teams, but we never discussed feelings. I had no clue Owen had been through so much. I was impressed with how together he was now.

I was far from together.

Jimmy was teaching soccer drills to a few kids. I dragged my hand through the grass, plucked at it like he'd done. It reminded me of my lawn cutting days and Gwen chasing after me, shoving clippings down my shirt. I'd never tossed out the T-shirt she'd bought for me. *Lawn Enforcement Officer*. No matter my anger surrounding our history, I couldn't part with the threadbare memory or delete her photo from my computer. She'd always been a part of me.

"I have to tell her," I said quietly.

"You do."

"I'm going to lose her."

"You might."

The air around me thickened. The April heatwave threatened to box me in. "I love her. In one day, my world's tipped sideways. There's never been anyone else for me. Doubt there ever will be."

Owen hunched forward, hands clasped in front of his crossed legs. "If you're honest about why, she'll hopefully

understand. Wish I had better advice.”

“It’s my mess to sleep in.”

My lungs felt blistered, charred and inflamed. Gwen had looked so hopeful at her apartment this morning, positive she’d meet her father and get the answers she sought. I’d be the one to torch that dream. She wouldn’t forgive me. Not for this.

I pressed my clenched fist to my stomach, but the jagged twisting didn’t lessen.

Helping her discover her mother had played a part in my choices. Gwen had needed to grieve, glimpse the woman who’d asked me not to let her daughter get away. But Jimmy was right, too: stalling now was selfish. Telling her meant losing her, which was the last thing I wanted.

There was no option in the end. I was her best friend. All these years later, that was my most important title. Best friends didn’t follow each other on false scavenger hunts. They forgave the unforgivable, which I’d already done. They also shared the tough stuff, truths that stung.

First thing I’d have to say when I met Gwen this morning was her father’s name.



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7:30 A.M.

16 ½ HOURS...



GWEN

I sank into my squat, then launched upward, limbs braced for impact. A sharp grunt drove from my lungs. I landed on my box, and the shock vibrated up my spine. I hopped down, shot my legs behind me into a burpee—my thirty-ninth. Another pushup. Another box jump. Oxygen raked through my lungs. Everything burned, the kind of pain that had me pushing harder.

Just one more jump. One more rep. To better my personal record.

Win against myself.

The only battle I could control these days.

“I’ll never understand the box jumping thing.” Ainsley stood in her usual spot, perfect ponytail, trendy Lululemon ensemble, not a bead of sweat marring her forehead. “Why would anyone put themselves through that?”

“Because it’s challenging,” I managed between reps.

“Doing the thigh machine is challenging, and I don’t risk smacking my face on the edge of a freaking box and losing my teeth. Plus, the thigh machine works my sex muscles. It’s practical.”

“The thigh machine doesn’t work sex muscles.” Rachel replaced her ten-pound weights. At least she exerted effort at the gym. “You should do those Kegel exercises.”

“I’ve tried those.” Emmett was to my right, giving the whole gym a show, men and women gawking as he curled his biceps. Owen’s brother was sex on a stick.

I landed one more jump, my legs nearly giving out. *Forty*. It was a solid number for this morning. For each of those burpee box jumps, I hadn’t stressed over August’s looming departure or the possibility of finding my father today. For forty jumps all that had mattered was launching, landing, and breathing. It was everything I loved about exercise and extreme sports, how rushing adrenaline silenced my mind.

Today, however, I also needed to talk with my friends.

Unfortunately, they were more interested in Emmett. “Kegel exercises are for women,” Rachel told him.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” he replied.

Ainsley’s ponytail bounced as she gave a little jump. Not a burpee box jump. More of a gossip-junkie jump. “Oh, do tell.”

Emmett, in all his muscly glory, stretched one arm across his chest. His tank top gave us a nice view. “Studies show that Kegels increase the size and intensity of erections. They also reduce premature ejaculation—which isn’t an issue for me,” he added quickly.

“But size is?” I asked, unable to resist. “I’m surprised and disappointed.”

“What? No. Of course not.”

Blinking innocently, Ainsley jumped on my Tease Emmett Train. “You just said it helps with size.”

“*Intensity*. They make orgasms better, for fuck’s sake.”

I shrugged at Ainsley. “That’s not what I heard.”

She zeroed in on Emmett’s groin. “There’s definitely a size issue.”

Rachel, who often shied away from our more graphic conversations, released a sharp cackle. Her laugh was a ridiculous sound. Part wheeze, part high-pitched bray. It was one of my favorite things about her.

Every head turned our way at the sound, the perfect opportunity for me to raise my voice, and say, “I’ll buy you a penis pump for your birthday.”

Men lifting their weights snickered. A couple women covered their mouths.

“You’re all assholes,” Emmett mumbled as he shot us a scowl and stomped toward the treadmills.

Ainsley beamed at me. “That was good fun. A perfect birthday treat.”

I couldn’t believe today was April 12<sup>th</sup>. A full year after we’d made our important resolutions. I could be mere hours from fulfilling mine.

“I’m really buying him one,” I said. “Imagine Cameron’s face when Emmett opens it.”

Messing with Emmett was always enjoyable, especially since he went out of his way to taunt Ainsley. She had, after all, crushed on him before we’d found out he was gay and she started dating his brother. A priceless story, one August didn’t know. I made a mental note to share it with him. My thoughts stuttered on him in the process, a skipping record that crooned: *mine, mine, mine.*

The brooding lines of his handsome face filled my mind, the intensity as he’d sung in the Blue-Eyed Raven, his devastating smile during our condiment war, the heat in his eyes as we’d made love.

An imagined snapshot of him followed, one of him sitting in an airplane.

My body tensed, every muscle flexing. I was standing still, not jumping or lifting weights, but I felt lightheaded. My heart hammered my breastbone. I pressed my hand to my chest.

“Gwen?” Rachel rubbed my back. “Are you okay?”

“No.”

The girls exchanged worried glances.

“This calls for a smoothie session,” Ainsley said. “We’re cutting this workout short.”

“That implies you actually worked out,” I said, fighting to breathe through my quasi panic attack.

She looped her arm around my waist and led me toward the juice bar. “I fixed my ponytail fifty times. That counts as exercise. My biceps ache.”

I snorted, her intended goal, and she squeezed my side.

Ten minutes later, we’d gathered around one of the small tables by the juice bar. Gym members walked across the hallway in front of us, the cardio room just beyond. Emmett jogged his heart out on one of the treadmills, other machines used by older and younger members following their morning routines.

This was *our* routine, when Rachel was in town. We’d exercise for an hour, then sip our smoothies and catch up and tease one another, but the royal blue walls seemed to vibrate, the florescent lighting too bright. I rubbed my eyes. “August leaves tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Rachel’s word dropped like a rock in my gut.

Ainsley released the straw from her mouth. “Like *back to Germany* leaves?”

I slumped into my chair and drew sad lines on my smoothie cup. The cool condensation dripped downward. “He has concerts booked, things he can’t change. So, yeah, he’s hopping on a plane tomorrow and flying across the world.”

Away from San Francisco. Away from me.

Ainsley cocked her head. “Has sex happened?”

My post-workout flush probably didn’t hide the heat scalding my cheeks. “Sex has definitely happened.”

“Was it good?” Ainsley dropped her voice. “I mean, there’s build-up with wanting someone that long. I’d worry about disappointment.”

It was hard to explain how both times we'd had sex had been on the floor or the ground, August and I both partly clothed, him with his jeans around his knees. The urgency to join had taken over, obliterating all other senses. *Together. Faster. More. More. More.* That was all that had mattered, moving with him as quickly and deeply as possible. Waiting for a bed and trading languid kisses hadn't been an option.

And disappointment? I'd never come so easily, no manual manipulation required. Our connection had been absolute.

"It was perfect," I said. Our perfect—a little messy and a lot wild. There were no rules for August and me, like he'd said.

Rachel dipped her head to catch my downturned eyes. "Will you do long distance?"

"I don't know." I hated how my voice cracked. I prided myself on surviving my mother's indifference with my chin up. Living without a father or extended family. Being strong on my own.

Ainsley slammed her smoothie down, the green liquid sloshing. "So that's it? He screws you and leaves, doesn't want to bother trying?" So much for her lowered voice. "What a typical musician. Chasing women, not caring about the carnage left in his wake. If he thinks he'll—"

"It's not him," I said quietly, interrupting her tirade.

"What's not him?" She still sounded ready to shave his eyebrows.

"The screwing and leaving. I'm the screwer and leaver."

"Ex-squeeze me?" She leaned toward me, and I leaned away.

I bounced my foot restlessly. No matter how much I swallowed, my strawberry banana smoothie felt stuck in my throat. "I can't do it. I have my life here, my adoption work, and he has his music and groupies, and he's in new cities every week." *And he has groupies.* "I don't fit in that life. Not the way I'd want to. I love my job and you guys. I don't want to

pick up and leave. Plus, my scuba and surf stuff are here, my mountain bike and rock climbing gear. I can't travel with it."

"Your surfboard and scuba gear? These are your priorities?" Now it sounded like she wanted to shave *my* eyebrows.

I waved a flustered hand. "It's expensive."

"You can store it."

"What would I use in Europe?"

"You'd rent equipment."

"It's not the same as having my stuff." My voice shrunk with each feeble excuse. I didn't even believe me.

"Gwen," Rachel cut in, no nonsense in her tone, "since you're the one who usually forces us to face hard truths, we're at a disadvantage. I can't read between the lines as well as you, but you're being a tad irrational. What's going on? The truth this time."

This was why I'd met the girls this morning. I could have canceled, gone for a run instead, but I'd wanted their advice, which meant quitting my vague routine. I stilled my bouncing leg and met their concerned gazes. "I'm scared."

Rachel moved aside her half-finished smoothie, turning all her focus on me. "Scared he'll cheat on you?"

I pictured him at last night's club, the women vying for his attention. He'd spent that time looking for me, trying to extricate himself politely. He wasn't the issue here. "No. Not really. I'm worried *I* can't handle it. That I'll freak myself out until I'm convinced he *will* do something to ruin us, when I'm pretty sure he won't, and then I'll act like those stalkerish women in the reality shows we heckle. I can't be those women. Those women are the worst.

"And look at our history—we've both admitted we loved each other as teens, and all we did was screw it up. Me more than him, obviously, but our timing was always off. This feels the same. Like we know we'd be amazing together, but our lives simply don't line up. Maybe we aren't meant to be."

“Does he need a penis pump, too?” Ainsley asked, straight-faced. “Is that the problem?”

I kicked her lightly under the table, but my favorite fashionista had me smiling. “There are no penis concerns.” I’d happily bronze his gorgeous cock, place it on a mantel. Come to think of it, I could bronze it, add some wiring and batteries...

I fanned my face, but I needed to stay on target and explain to the girls how rough I’d been the last time August had disappeared from my life.

“Imagine being so sad you could only drink boxed wine,” I told Rachel, who mimed a puke-a-thon. “Or wearing white after Labor Day and tossing your Coach purse collection because you’re having an epic pity party.” Ainsley clutched her chest, horrified. “That’s how I was after losing August, but more of the *emo drown myself in screamer music and ramen noodles* depressed. I never went out, barely attended my classes. I hit rock bottom, and we’d only ever kissed *one time*. We’ve been together less than twenty-four hours now, and I can barely go two minutes without aching for him. I won’t survive losing him this time. It’s easier to end things when he leaves.”

My friends stared at me. The vinyl seat under my bare thighs got sweaty.

“I’ll take it from here,” Rachel told Ainsley.

She wore a similar black tank top to mine, but hers said *Save Water Drink Wine*. I focused on the writing, which meant I was staring at her boobs. Easier than facing her impending confrontation.

“Who did you lean on when you were nineteen?” Rachel asked, all business, like we were on an episode of *Law & Order*. “After the incident we aren’t supposed to mention.”

“No one.” Finch and I had quit our friendship cold turkey. Clean Your Damn Area Claire had been nothing more than a roommate. I’d had no caring family to call.

“Did you like school?” She crossed her arms, covering the writing on her boobs.

I forced my attention to her stern face. “I hated school.” Which she already knew.

“Were you part of CrossFit?”

“No.”

“Had you started surfing or rock climbing or jumping out of planes?”

I narrowed my eyes at her, gradually following her breadcrumb trail. “No.”

“And now, nine years later, do you love your job and adore your *amazing* best friends, and have a crew of CrossFit buddies who jump on boxes? And when that isn’t enough, do you do insane activities like toss yourself out of airplanes?”

When I stood on the precipice of a skydive, I’d look down and study the broad strokes of a town or city, the roads and forests and lakes in their expanse. Hikers below could enjoy the wild flowers and sprouting mushrooms. Fishermen could inhale the briny air and listen to yodeling loons.

Different perspectives of the same place.

Exactly how Rachel was reordering my history in a new way, forcing me to study it from a different angle, and acknowledge that the woman I was now could handle more because I *had* more.

“Yes,” I said quietly.

She looked at Ainsley and fanned a hand toward me. “I’d like the record to show that teenage Gwen had no support network, and present-day Gwen has an incredible amount going for her.” She placed her palm face-up on the table, waiting until I put my hesitant hand in hers. She gathered my fingers. “Losing him would be awful, but not giving him a shot, when you’re clearly swoony over the man, would be worse.”

“I’m still scared.”

“Does bungee jumping, which you’ve done more than once, still scare you?”

“It does.” No matter how many times I stepped into that void, adrenaline would send my blood rushing, fear and excitement mixing.

“Think of dating August like that. We’re your rope—us and all this other amazing stuff in your life. If your leap takes a turn for the worse, we’ll keep you tethered.”

“I’ll take you shopping,” Ainsley added. “And we’ll get Rachel drunk and watch her embarrass herself.”

A guaranteed pick-me-up, and I exhaled a slow breath.

I’d assumed my downward spiral after my WTF had been because of losing August, that he’d been the eye of that storm. He had been, to some degree. But I’d never considered my situation at the time, how it had played a large part. A *bigger* part. Without coping skills and people to commiserate with, I’d wallowed. No one had tossed my unwashed laundry at my face and told me to get a grip. No one had hugged me when it all became too much. No one had acted out *Law & Order* or told me penis jokes.

Sitting alone in a dank apartment had been a one-way ticket to Self-Pity City.

A wave of emotion rocked me. “I love you bitches.”

Ainsley covered her heart with her hand. “Nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me. And meeting you two was the luckiest day of my life. I’m honored to share our birthdays, and I can’t wait to celebrate tonight.” She raised her smoothie for a toast. “To being radical bitches and scaring ourselves... and buying Emmett a penis pump.”

Rachel’s cackle erupted. “To us and fear and penis pumps.”

We clinked our smoothies and chatted about tonight’s birthday outing. The plan was to meet for casual drinks, us with our men. Emmett and Cameron would join us.

And August.

I still couldn't believe he was my man, but he was. It didn't matter that yesterday had been our first day together in an eternity. Crying on his chest last night, letting him see me vulnerable and weak, had made me feel strong, not alone. Not as a charity case. He was my other, and your other was supposed to support you and protect you. Exactly how I felt about him. I wanted to protect him, understand the man he'd become.

There was no use fighting our pull, and the girls were right: I'd survive no matter the outcome. Which meant it was time to jump in with both feet. I had unused vacation days, enough to string together a few weeks of travel. I'd check my calendar this morning, figure out when I could meet him in Germany. Although anxious to open up fully and put my heart and future on the line, I had to try. I'd loved August as long as I'd known him.

Even still. Even now. All this time later.

The girls kept chatting, but I could barely sit still. I couldn't wait to share my decision with August. I'd tell him the second we met at Fisherman's Wharf. But my restlessness was more than that. Realizing I'd interpreted my depression after my WTF wrong, that I'd been too entrenched in the intensity of my sadness to understand more than August had knocked me sideways, left me unsettled.

I'd also been sure finding my father was the right thing to do. That knowing him, even if he was an asshole, was better than living with the ten million unanswered questions I'd amassed. Was this the wrong perspective, too? If he was horrible, would I truly be happier knowing?

There was a reason my mother had never told me his name. It could have been personal—her fears and issues driving her. Or it could have been to protect me from something awful. If I gave up this search and forgot about my birthday resolution, I could spend the next day with August, in a bed, a shower, against a wall, on the floor again. We could make excellent use of our seconds. I suddenly wasn't sure on the smart move.

My attention drifted toward Emmett, who was running on his treadmill. His mother had left him and Owen when they'd been young. They had different fathers, men they'd never known or met. He would understand my situation more than most people, another new support in my life.

I drained the last of my smoothie. "I need to chat with Emmett, then I'm heading out."

Ainsley launched an air kiss my way. "Ask him if he needs the small or extra-small penis pump."

I snickered.

Rachel shushed our friend. "More important is that you're going to pledge your undying love to August before you meet us later, right?"

I drew an X over my heart. "I'll offer to have his babies."

Not such a farfetched concept, considering my reaction after our sweaty session on my floor, how I'd wished I hadn't been on the pill. I almost touched my belly now, willing it to be so.

I dodged the weight machines and stopped at the side of Emmett's treadmill. "Can we chat a second?"

He glowered at me. "I'm not talking to you."

"This isn't about your penis size." But I said it loud enough for the girl at his left to gawk and stumble as she ran. No point missing an opportunity.

Muttering under his breath, Emmett slowed his treadmill until it stopped. He grabbed his towel and joined me by the water fountain, a quieter alcove to the side. "This better be good."

It certainly wasn't a light penis-pump talk. "Do you wish you knew your father?"

He reared back at my sharp conversation turn. "What's this about?"

I leaned my shoulder into the wall, the cold, hard plaster steadying. "I never knew mine either and it's always plagued

me, the kind of void in your life that consumes you. And I have this chance to maybe find him, something I've dreamed of forever. But, I don't know...all of a sudden, I'm wondering if I should let it go."

"That's definitely not penis talk."

I snorted. "Yeah, no. Sorry to be so heavy this early in the morning."

He mopped his forehead with his towel, taking his time. "It's a tough one to answer. Part of me would like to know the man responsible for half my DNA, and part of me doesn't care. He had his chance to know me and didn't take it, or maybe he never knew I existed. To be honest, I stopped letting either possibility affect my life a while back. Dating Cameron had something to do with it—accepting my past doesn't dictate my future. I have a great brother and grandmother. A hot boyfriend who knows I don't need *a fucking penis pump*." His glare was adorable. "Not sure that helped much."

It echoed what Rachel had said, how my current life was full, no matter what curveballs were tossed my way. Still, I felt unmoored. "I want to find him, I'm just worried it'll send me for a loop when I have a lot going on right now."

A lot being the understatement of the millennia.

He fisted his towel and folded his arms. "All I can suggest is this: you have to do you. Owen and I coped differently with our past, but we both made it through. There's no wrong or right. So if this is something you need, for closure or whatever, then putting it off will stress you more. If you think you're ready to let it go, then"—he shrugged—"let it go."

*Shrugged.* Like it was that simple. You know, just uncover my father's name, meet the man who might have chosen to ostracize me from his life, or like, whatever...*let it go*.

But when it came down to it, I guess it was kind of simple.

When the clock had chimed midnight last year, there'd been a reason I'd chosen this resolution. Ainsley, Rachel, and I had promised to make our wishes big ones, things we'd believed were essential to our lives.

Finding my father was essential.

I guess that was my answer, in the end. I would meet August at my mother's park bench and tell him I was ready to look ahead and plan for our future. Then we'd see, together, if my father's last name had been memorialized in that very spot. Whatever happened from there, at least I'd have August.



---

9:00 A.M.

15 HOURS...



## AUGUST

I loitered by the Alcatraz ticket booth for so long parents side-eyed me and tucked their kids to their sides. My unrelenting frown wasn't helping. Gwen hadn't arrived yet. My lockjaw had returned. I stared at the park bench mentioned in Mary's journal, half a second from rushing over and searching for Ted's name possibly scratched into the wood.

*So I can scratch it out*, a dark part of me whispered.

But I wouldn't stoop that low.

The day was sunny but brisk. The sweat from my punishing run had been washed off in a blistering shower, but a feverish chill still descended.

I was about to lose the love of my life after I'd just found her.

Gwen's tousled hair snagged my attention first. Across the street and waiting for a gap in traffic, she bounced on her toes. She wore ankle boots, a fitted T-shirt—blue with something written on it. Her tight jeans made my mouth water. They had a rip in the thigh, the perfect place for me to ease my fingers in, tease her with soft strokes.

I hadn't tasted her yet, licked and sucked and mapped her body. When she learned what I'd done, that fantasy would be shot to shit.

She made it to the bench and touched its edge, but snatched her hand back as though she'd been hit with an electric shock. She bit her lip and searched the area. Throngs of tourists walked the strip. One kid clung to her parents' hands as they swung her between steps. Carefree. Happy. The briny air expanded with chatter and squawking seagulls and laughs. My endless regrets lodged in my throat.

I should have contacted Gwen the second I'd received that letter.

Or the next day. The next week. The next month. So many days I could have given her with her father. Days she'd never get back.

I kept out of view, sick to my stomach.

*She refused to talk about our future*, I reminded myself. I may have been all in, but Gwen was still living our seconds. Even without this massive obstacle, she might not have given us a chance. She might be relieved when faced with my deception. It would make ending things with me easier, freeing her from the burden of pushing me away.

Yes. That was how this would go. My confession would give Gwen the out she wanted. She could keep her friends and life and not have to risk it all on me. This would be better for her.

She paced, clenching and unclenching her hands, her face equal parts excited, scared, and determined. Exactly how she'd looked at her first regional track meet. I'd been there for her that day. Not her mother. No close friends or siblings attended, only me to cheer her on. I'd screamed myself hoarse as she'd torn past the finish line.

Today, I wasn't the one in her corner. Today, I'd be the one letting her down.

When she took her lip chewing up a notch, looking ready to break skin, I scrubbed a hand down my face and trudged forward.

The second she spotted me, she waved and smiled, beaming with open affection. It was too much. Having those

gorgeous eyes brimming with joy, having seen them ignite at my touch—how was I supposed to let that go?

*She'll be relieved in the long run. Her life will be better.*

I clipped a man's elbow as I approached her and tried to offer an apology, but my saliva was all gummed up. A break in pedestrians finally gave us a clear path to each other, and I forced myself forward. Gwen still seemed nervous and excited, shifting on her feet, hands now tight little fists. I should ask her how she was doing, hug her and offer support. That would only make this harder.

"We need to talk," I said quickly. "I should have—"

"I bought a plane ticket," she blurted before I could finish. There was a small distance between us. Mere inches. She seemed hesitant to close the space.

I froze. "You did what?"

It sounded like she'd said she'd bought a ticket, which could mean a thousand things, one of which had my heart pounding a near-deafening beat.

"I booked a flight."

"Where?"

"To Germany."

"Germany?" Yep, deafening.

"Ger-ma-ny," she said, emphasizing each syllable. "You should Q-tip after you shower. Helps with hearing." She mimed cleaning her ear.

I'd laugh if I weren't stunned. Sick. Devastated. What happened to the woman only willing to live our seconds? "You booked a flight to Germany?"

The notion wasn't sinking in. She'd imposed our no-future-talk rule. Changing the game now wasn't okay, not with what I had to say, but she was turning it all upside down.

"Well, let me see." She tapped her chin and squinted at the sky, then she grinned at me, sweet yet tentative. "I believe that's what I did."

“You’re coming to Germany.” A statement this time. I couldn’t sound like a bigger idiot.

“Wow, so...now I’m worried you have a head injury or something. Did you fall on your run? And if this is you freaking out because I took this step and you’re having second thoughts, then I’ll need you to back away before I embarrass myself by puking on your shoes.” She pressed a hand to her belly. “August? You’re kind of scaring me.”

“No, babe.” My limbs finally woke up, and I gripped her shoulders. I shouldn’t kiss her or pull her against me. I should keep my distance and say what needed saying. My body wouldn’t obey. I pressed a kiss to her forehead, another to her perfect lips, then I crushed her against my chest. Tighter than tight. She’d for sure feel the thrashing of my heart. “I’m not having second thoughts. I want you and this more than I want to breathe. There’s just...”

I inhaled her feminine scent. She smelled clean and sweet with a hint vanilla, freshly showered, which had me picturing us under a hot spray as I licked a path along her toned flesh. Dammit. This was not the time to be thickening behind my zipper. She’d feel that, too. And it was wrong.

She slipped her hands down my back, cresting them alongside my spine, over the waistband of my jeans. “I want all of you more than I want to breathe, too,” she whispered.

I held her harder against me. It could be my last time. “What changed?”

“I can’t lose you, August. Not again. I can only come for three weeks, and there’s a chance we won’t work. Long distance will be beyond painful, but I’ll survive regardless. I have Rachel and Ainsley, their guys and Emmett and Cameron, and other outlets in my life. No matter what happens, I’ll pick myself up. Not giving us a shot would be worse than trying and failing. You’re worth the risk.”

She was worth everything. She deserved everything, including the truth.

Pulse revving into overdrive, I forced myself to create space between us. I ran my hands through her hair, skimmed my thumbs over her cheeks. “I want you with me in Germany, wherever I am for as long as you can swing it. I’ll fly home often. I’ll reassess my career, see about building my audience in the States. We have options. We’ll make this work, and you trying means more than you know.”

My mouth was desert-level dry. Licking my lips didn’t help.

She fisted the back of my shirt and leaned away, tension in the guarded movement. “So why are you looking at me like we’re saying goodbye?”

I dropped my head forward, focused on a crack in the sidewalk between our feet. A mini fault line that could open up and swallow me whole. “This isn’t goodbye, Gwen. Not if I have anything to say about it.”

I forced myself to meet her eyes. Her pupils had blown wide, darkness taking over shades of green. “Why do I sense a but?”

“There’s something I have to tell you.”



GWEN

*Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom. Doomed to Die. The Doom Generation.*

I mentally listed every movie or show I knew with the word *doom* (spoiler alert: *The Doom Generation* was a hardcore film with a questionable three-way and a penchant for grotesque violence), unable to process the shift in August’s demeanor. Not that processing was required. Doom was the real takeaway here.

Doom in his flitting eyes. Doom in his blotchy skin.

A couple times, before skydiving, I had nightmares prior. They'd consisted of me reaching for my ripcord, only to find it missing. I'd pummel to earth, spinning, unable to scream, the ground racing toward me at death-defying speeds. Startling awake had always been a sweaty, panting affair. Like right now.

I'd expected my flight news to come with hugs and making out, an awkward victory dance, maybe. I'd paid for a non-refundable flight, had been more honest with August than I'd ever dreamed. The words *I love you* had almost passed my lips. Present day love. Not past love. Not just because of our history. I'd leapt from a plane for August Cruz.

And the ripcord was slipping through my grasp.

A sheen of moisture clung to his upper lip, because he had something to tell me.

*Doomsday. Mansion of the Doomed. The Sword of Doom.*

I hadn't done this in ages, listing movie titles with key words, a nervous habit I'd thought I'd kicked. As a kid, I'd go through this obsessive exercise, a way to keep it together when my mother was hurtful or I'd flunked a test. Teenaged August would snicker at me, and say, "You're doing it again."

"Doing what?" I'd reply, royally embarrassed.

"That weird movie title thing."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"Am not."

"Your lips are moving, Possum."

I'd hated how well he'd known me.

Today I made sure to keep my lips stiff, but my focus was fading fast. Traffic sped behind me. The tourists in my peripheral vision blurred. Noises swirled with the scents of car exhaust and ocean air, spinning around me at a dizzying rate.

I broke free of August's arms and blinked away my sudden vertigo. "Say it."

“What?”

“Whatever it is that has you sweating on a non-sweaty day.” It wasn’t warm enough for him to be flushing like that.

His next swallow lasted an eternity. He didn’t reply.

“Spit it out, August.” I hugged myself, tried to breathe through the cumulating dread. “Is there a woman in Europe you didn’t mention? Did you get someone pregnant or something?”

Which had me wishing again for my belly to swell with our baby. Not a healthy sentiment when the guy at the core of that wish looked ready to faint.

“I know your father’s name,” he said.

Arms locked around my waist, I squinted at the park bench, trying to piece together his statement. That bench was the reason we were here. I’d almost searched it when I’d arrived, desperate to learn if my father’s last name had been scratched into the wood, but I hadn’t wanted to do it alone. Telling August I’d booked my flight had been the larger thing in the moment, my need to tell him what I’d done.

Now it felt like a swarm of wasps had invaded my belly. “You searched the bench already?”

“No.” Again with the swallowing. “I knew before. I wanted to tell you yesterday, when I came by the house. It’s why I was there, then that suitcase showed up and the energy between us...” He tugged at the back of his hair, eyes pleading with me to understand.

I didn’t understand. Not by a long shot.

He knew my father’s name? Pre-crazy scavenger hunt? “Are you saying you knew before I found the journal? Before we traipsed around the city looking for clues?” Before I’d made love to him on my apartment floor.

My knees weakened, and I landed hard on the bench. The wasps in my stomach turned vicious, stinging at will.

He crouched in front of me, hands on my knees. “I knew, and I had every intention of telling you, but then there was that

spark between us, which I never expected, and I delayed. Just...to be with you, Gwen, like that, like old times but better—I couldn't give that up. Then you started learning things about your mother. You were seeing her in a different light. Right or wrong, stupid or smart, I didn't want to steal that from you. If I told you, you'd have stopped reading her diary. I know you. I know you'd have tossed it aside, and you needed the closure. You *still* need it. It's why you cried last night, why you finally let it out. I couldn't tell you yet.”

I was in no state to unpack his comments about my mother, but the desperation in his voice tamed the angry wasps. He *had* shown up at my mother's to tell me something. It had gotten brushed aside with everything else: the suitcase, the journal, our intense attraction. He couldn't have planned for any of that.

It still explained nothing.

“How long have you known? How'd you even find out?”

“I know this'll sound bad, and I feel like shit about it....” He was still in his uncomfortable squat, clutching my knees. He inched closer. “I got a letter from your mother. She gave me his name and wanted me to be the one to tell you.”

“My mother told you? Why the hell would she tell you and not me?” I'd only asked her a million and one times.

“I don't know why. I can only guess it was to bring us together.”

My confusion amplified. My mother had actively distanced herself from me. Choosing this stealthy way to finally show she cared made no sense. How had she even known I'd had feelings for August? Unless she hadn't been as oblivious about me and my life as I'd believed. I tried piecing through her possible motivations, but stopped abruptly. “She died thirty days ago, August. When did you get this letter?”

His brow crumpled. “A couple months ago. February.”

“Excuse me?” I flinched, the ripcord tethering me to him shredding apart.

Two months. He'd known two months, and he'd said *nothing*. No. Scratch that. He'd said plenty, lying to my face, pretending he didn't know this one, crucial fact.

I pushed him away, and he nearly fell on his ass. I needed space. More air. The city sounds around me muted, like I was under water. I hunched forward and dropped my head to my hands.

*Breathe in, breathe out.* It should be a simple action, second nature, but each inhale serrated my throat.

The past twenty-four hours he'd let me follow that stupid diary, never letting on what he knew. Wasting my time. All because he thought I should discover my mother? I lifted my head. The thing weighed a thousand pounds. "You had no right to keep that from me."

"I know."

"You stole that time, and I feel like a fool. I dragged you around the city, for Christ's sake, chasing after someone whose name you already knew. All because you thought I needed to know my mother fucked my father at a fucking lookout point?"

I recoiled at my own harshness. It wasn't the truth. Not based on the diary. My mother had lost her virginity to a caring man, and I'd just turned it into something ugly. "You should have told me." My fight drained, leaving my voice weak and shaky.

"I should have, but that letter hit me like a stack of bricks, brought a lot of hurt and issues back. It took me a while to gather the courage to see you, then this craziness happened. But we found each other during that time, Gwen, like your mother must have wanted. If I told you first thing at her house, where would we be now?"

His question depleted my reserves. My breath shuddered. Where *would* we be? Not planning a future together, buying nonrefundable plane tickets, and booking vacation time. I wouldn't have seen him play my revised hate song. We

wouldn't have had a ketchup and mustard fight. Sex might not have happened.

The possibility was unthinkable.

His issues and hurt—the reason for his delay—had been my doing, not his. My WTF was why he'd waited to tell me, and he had intended to tell me yesterday, at my mother's. He was telling me *now*, twenty-four hours after barreling back into my life. Not days or weeks. The omission still stung, but there was no denying how overwhelming our reunion had been for both of us.

I curled my toes in my boots, tried to unsnarl the clutter in my head. All I was doing was wasting more time. "What's his name?"

"Ted Mercer." He searched my eyes, the way a lost sailor searched for land, unsure he'd find his way home.

I wanted to be that for him. Home. A haven. The center of his world. There was too much to absorb. "Ted Mercer," I repeated. That I could focus on. The name I'd longed to find.

He was the Tom or Ted Uncle Rex had mentioned. The man who'd wooed my mother with hot dogs and Long Island Iced Teas and romantic gestures under the stars. "Do you know his address? Is he still in San Francisco?" As the reality of the news sank in, hope replaced my shock. "I'd like to go now. Look him up first, obviously. But we should go."

No matter August's deceit, I still used the word *we*. I didn't want to do this alone.

"Gwen."

I stood and waved him off, antsy to get moving. "Save the apologizing. I'm still upset with you and not sure where we go from here, but I need someone with me for this, and I'd like that someone to be you. We'll sort through the rest later. I just need to find him, before—"

"Gwen." He stepped in front of me, blocking my path.

"Honestly, August, I don't want to deal with this now. My birthday wish is up at midnight. As much as we need to talk

this out, finding my father is more important. I want to meet him today. With you. It's supposed to happen today." I shook out my hands, one rushed-out sentence away from hyperventilating.

August gripped my hips. "He's dead, honey."

I jerked backward. Thickness clawed at my throat. "What?" The syllable barely choked out.

Devastation rang clear in his pained eyes. "I went to see him when I arrived in San Francisco, to make sure he wasn't someone who'd hurt you. The woman who answered told me he'd passed away."

"What?" I'd heard him. The words had registered, but their meaning hadn't. I was supposed to meet my father. Today. It was going to happen today. "I don't understand."

I didn't want to.

"He had a heart attack."

I sank back to the bench. I was surprised it didn't cave under the weight of this crushing news. I'd wondered when I was younger, had considered that he might be dead, but it didn't jive with my mother's vehemence to keep the information from me. There would have been no harm sharing a deceased man's name.

I pressed my hand to my breastbone. The pressure didn't ease the pain.

"Gwen, honey?"

I didn't glance up at August. My father was gone. I'd never meet him and ask if he was an adrenaline junkie, like me. Find out if he hated mayonnaise. Ask why he'd left my mother. Why he'd never wanted to meet me.

If he'd even known I existed.

"I was sure I'd meet him today," I whispered. August crouched again, held my knees tight. His face blurred through my watery gaze. "When did he die, did she say?"

He didn't reply.

I wiped my building tears, needing to see August clearly, the security in his tender gaze. It was the wrong move. Tension tugged a sharp line between his brows. A muscle in his temple bunched. “There’s more I need to say. I’m sick about it, wish I could go back, do things differently, but...”

He trailed off, and I shrank smaller.

I didn’t ask him to spit it out this time. I sat immobile, my legs too numb to stand. Instinctively, I leaned away from him.

He gripped my knees like they were a lifeline. “He died two weeks ago.”

“Sorry, what?” The same question I’d asked this entire conversation. The only one that came easily.

“It was a couple weeks ago. A heart attack, she said.”

“Two *weeks*?”

He nodded.

“But you said you’ve had the letter two months?” The fragments of information slotted together in appalling clarity. Two months. Two weeks. The time in between I’d lost. If August had told me first thing, when he should have, I’d have met my father.

“The letter came as a shock,” he repeated, desperation roughening his tone. “I was touring. It brought a lot of tough stuff back for me, like I said. And it had been years already. I figured it wasn’t a rush. I delayed, Gwen. I was so stuck on how it was messing me up, that I put it off. So the fact that you won’t meet him is my fault. I could have told you two months ago, but I didn’t. I’ve been in town a week, since I knocked on his door. It took me that long to work up the guts to tell you yesterday, then everything...”

He dropped his head, and I stared over him, seeing nothing yet everything. Everything I missed out on because of what he’d done: meeting my father, learning about the man, discovering my history, my genealogy.

I also really heard August, clearer this time. Louder, his words pounding in my head. He hadn’t told me because he’d

been messed up. Because I'd hurt him nine years ago and hadn't apologized, and we'd spent that time nursing our wounds. He hadn't told me because I'd broken his heart.

I did this. *Me*. Not him.

I ruined my chance to meet my father.

"I'm so sorry, Gwen. I wish I could change the past. Make different choices."

A sharp laugh rattled my seizing lungs. I was the reigning queen of shitty choices. I'd pushed August away before college, had destroyed him after by sleeping with his brother. I was responsible for this twisting in my gut now, a fierce knot of failure.

I deserved the pain. Every agonizing twinge.

What I didn't deserve was August. Booking that plane ticket had been a mistake, a futile attempt to cling to what could have been. That's all we'd been doing, really, pretending we could forget. I'd never forget now. Not when my actions led to this.

Slowly, I stood, aware of passing crowds, but feeling separate. Alone. "I'd like you to give me my father's address and go." My voice sounded flat, detached.

Panic widened his eyes. "What? No. I'm not leaving."

"You don't have a choice. I need to go there, and I'm going alone."

"No way. You said you wanted me there and I want to be there for you."

I wanted him with me as much as I wanted to rewrite our past. An impossibility. I couldn't even look at August. I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to look at myself again.

Fortifying my strength, I blinked away snapshots of the past two days: August strumming my guitar, the sexy curve of his lips, his laugh, his voice, how his body had possessed mine. I blinked away imagined images of us in Germany, our rose-colored future. I poured gasoline on it all and watched it

burn, like in his hate song. “Please give me his address and go,” I repeated.

He gripped the sides of my head, forced my focus on him. “I know you’re angry with me. I deserve it. But this is bigger than us. Please let me come.”

“There’s no us, August.”

He flinched. “Excuse me?”

“This thing we’ve been doing...” I motioned aggressively between us, but he wouldn’t release his hold on me. “We’ve been playing make-believe, pretending we can forgive and forget. It’s not realistic. Too much has happened.” Tears slipped down my cheeks, countless emotions pushing them free. I wanted to hate him for his actions, but I was the only person who deserved blame. I also loved him. Irrevocably. Crushing. Embroiled in this tangle was the loss of a father I’d never met, and a stewing self-hatred flooding my veins. My choices. My actions. My fuck-ups.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Gwen. I’ve forgiven you. I’m done with grudges and self-pity. I want to move on. I *have* moved on. And I’m not letting you go.”

“You don’t have a choice.”

The dark slash of his eyebrows softened, his hands gentling on my face. “I love you, Possum. I love you and I’ve forgiven you. So, yeah, I think we have lots of choices.”

*No, no, no, no, no.* He couldn’t. It wasn’t fair. I tried to shake my head, but his hands tightened. I squeezed my eyes shut. “You can’t love me.”

“I can and I do. I’ve loved you since you ran through my sprinklers and stuck your tongue out at me. I loved you every time you scared me when pretending to sleep, when you shoved grass down my shirt, and fought me for my comic books. The past nine years, even. I loved you when I hated you, Gwen. So I need you to tell me what you need, how I can earn your forgiveness.”

What *he* could do? After all the ways I’d failed him, he was pleading with *me*, wanting to shoulder my burden. As

though I wasn't the root of this disease. I gripped his wrists and removed his possessive hold of my cheeks. "You're forgiven."

He exhaled roughly. "Yeah?"

God, his hope was palpable, a warmth I'd kill to sink into. Live in. Never leave. But he had never really been mine to keep. "You're forgiven," I repeated, stepping back, creating space. "This isn't your fault. It's mine. I don't forgive myself for what I did to you and for never apologizing. I don't forgive myself for hurting you so badly you couldn't reach out when you got my mother's letter. Not meeting my father is my doing, not yours."

"No." He shook his head, moved toward me.

I held up my hand. "Just give me the letter. Dragging this out will only hurt more."

"Dragging what out?"

"This charade. We're over. It's over. We both need to move on."

"We're not over, Gwen."

"Do I need to spell it for you? We're done." My harsh tone tasted like shame.

His posture stiffened, an imperceptible hardening of his stance. His lips compressed. "Such bullshit."

It was my turn to flinch. I dashed at my drying tears. "What?"

"This is your thing, Gwen. This is what you do. You push people away when it gets too real, when they start to care too much."

"I'm not nineteen anymore. This isn't like then. Everything's too intertwined."

"You're telling me you can walk away from us? Just like that? Like the past twenty-four hours never happened?"

If it were only that easy. "When I look at you, all I'll ever see are the mistakes I've made. All I've lost. So, no...there's

no *us*. We're done."

"We're done?" He stood statue still, back to repeating me.

Nothing about me was still. Not the addled thoughts spiraling through my head, or the frantic pounding of my heart. Done. August and me. *Done. Finished.* I choked down the sob threatening to rise. This was the right move. It had to be. It was the only one I could compute right now. He'd write more hate songs and meet a woman who wasn't a train wreck waiting to happen. He'd find peace. "Yes, August. We're done."

He moved so close his hot breath brushed my cheek. "Tell me you don't love me, too. Say it and I'll go."

I couldn't. He knew it. Problem was, I didn't love myself. "Don't make this harder than it needs to be. Please. I just need the letter."

He scrutinized me.

I bit down on my cheek, willing the burn in my throat to cease. I would go to my father's house on my own, ask to see photo albums. Find out who the man had been. Learn if he'd had kids. *That* thought winded me anew.

I'd daydreamed about the possibility when younger, wondered if I might have siblings, a sister or brother to commiserate with when my mother had berated me. Someone to tease and have in my corner. The prospect had taken a backseat to the more pressing issue of finding my father, but not now.

Now they could be all I had.

I wiped my nose with my forearm. Far from attractive. "Did my father have kids?"

"I..." August's brows drew together. "Shit, I didn't ask. I was upset and took off."

I nodded and inhaled deeply. "Can I have the address, please?"

He reached for me. "Gwen..."

I angled my shoulder away from him. “I need the address and letter. I’m going there alone. We’re just not meant to be, August.”

A boulder lodged in my throat at the brush-off. It felt like a lie. I couldn’t see the truth any longer.

His hazel eyes were glassy. That muscle in his temple jumped incessantly. I wanted to burrow into his chest, wrap myself in his arms and scent and pretend I hadn’t ruined us.

Neither of us moved.

Eventually, he licked his lips and pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. He held it out for me. “I love you, Gwen. I’ll always love you, and this isn’t over.”

Trembling, I snatched the paper from him and spun on my heels. I waited for a break in traffic and bolted across the street, locking myself in my car the second I reached it. The paper was folded into a small square. The edges were soft, ripped slightly like it had been read often.

Before I opened it, I chanced a glance back toward the bench.

August was still standing there, his hands shoved in his front pockets, staring at me. He mouthed something I couldn’t decipher. I tore my gaze away.



---

11:30 A.M.

12 ½ HOURS...



GWEN

When I first learned August was leaving tomorrow afternoon, I'd willed our seconds to slow down. I'd wanted to stretch our breaths, elongate our words, extend our kisses into forever. Hold his hand and argue with him during the pauses in between. Stare at him to stamp his handsome profile on my brain.

Now everything moved too slowly: my fingers as they traced my mother's cursive writing, my breaths nearing a catatonic state, my eyelids that couldn't remember how to blink.

I'd read about this before, how anxiety and stress could produce numbness. I'd researched the effects for my job, to better cope with prospective adoptive parents. The insight allowed me to choose better words when preparing them for the grueling process, had helped me find ways to ease the sting when applications were denied. I'd never experienced this kind of deadening shock firsthand.

I was experiencing it now.

Nine years ago, I crushed August. Because of it, he kept information from me. My father had died. I'd never meet him. I could have siblings. I pushed August away.

Now I was underwater again, my body moving in languid frames.

*Blink.*

*Blink.*

*Exhale.*

*Lift head.*

*Blink...blink.*

I'd driven here on autopilot, wasn't sure how long I'd been parked on this suburban street. It was pleasant enough, trees shading the lawns, some manicured with colorful gardens, others overgrown. One had a basketball net in the driveway; another was littered with Tonka trucks.

The home to my right was nondescript. Gray siding. Red door. Purple potted flowers sat on the concrete step just outside. I didn't have plants in my apartment. I'd bought one after signing my lease. Then I killed it, over or under watering the darn thing. I had a hopeless black thumb.

I didn't know the name of the purple flowers taunting me with their prettiness. Whoever had tended them wasn't a plant killer like me. That person had a green thumb. That person had lived in that house with my father, had maybe given birth to my half-siblings.

Or maybe my father had coaxed those blooms into beauty.

Or his kid had.

Or a stupid gardener unrelated to me had, and the fact that I was still sitting here in this car rereading my mother's letter as if it would give me the courage to knock on that red door and meet the people who could alter my life had absolutely zero to do with plant growing aptitude.

*Inhale.*

*Blink.*

*Exhale.*

*Blink.*

*Repeat.*

I looked down and reread my mother's letter for the umpteenth time.

*Dear August,*

*I am dying. As a dying woman, I have a request. Below is the name of Gwen's father. She has always wanted to know who he is. I ask that you be the one to tell her, be there for her when she finds him.*

*Remember what I told you on Gwen's nineteenth birthday.*

I couldn't imagine what she'd told him the night of my WTF, but it was the words "be there for her" that snagged my attention. They were an indecipherable code, because my mother had written as though she'd cared what happened to me. As though my mental state had concerned her.

Yet this was the same woman who'd looked me in the eye, and had said, "I never wanted kids."

That nugget had been offered when I'd caught her staring at a blank TV screen. I'd asked if I could watch *Friends*, and she'd spat those hateful words. No provocation. She hadn't been drinking. Pure hatred aimed at me...because I'd come from a man she'd despised, or because he hadn't wanted me, or I'd stolen her freedom. Having a child at seventeen wasn't anyone's life goal.

Whatever the reason, that cutting comment had drawn blood, a wound that hadn't cauterized. She'd gotten up from the sofa afterward, had walked to the door and left. Hadn't even closed it behind her. Like she'd been in a trance, locked in her past.

But here, in this letter, she'd asked August to *be there for me*.

Her diary was on the passenger seat, printed in her youthful lettering, ripe with the memories of a Sunshine Girl who had loved to dance and listen to music and had dreamed of performing on Broadway. A girl who'd fallen in love. Had she wanted kids back then? Had she dreamed of carrying her lover's child?

I lifted the journal carefully, thumbed through the pages slowly. My limbs were too heavy to move at a normal speed. I stopped on her first kiss again, reread the reverence and excitement in her words. I felt for this girl. I ached to read her happily ever after. I wanted her to find true love.

I cared about teenage Mary Hamilton.

If I weren't strapped into my seat, the revelation would have knocked me over. A full stone-cold faint. Regret followed, for what she'd stolen from me. If she'd talked to me, had explained about her past, shared what had beaten her down into the shell of a person she'd become, maybe we could have connected, had some form of relationship. All I'd been left with was a shadow of her past.

Still, a hint of hope lightened the heaviness. I didn't hate my mother. I'd grown to pity her through her words. Not an ideal sentiment, but better. My pulse tapped a faster tune, and my haziness cleared. I should leave this car, knock on that red door, discover if I had a brother or sister, but the diary was on my lap, drawing me in. My mother was drawing me in.

I flipped to where I'd last read the journal, the page about the park bench. The next few entries were typical teenage drama: grumbles about a girl at school who'd ditched her at lunch, choice words about her zealot parents. She mooned over the man she loved. And dance. Always dance.

Then I caught my breath.

Cliff jumping. My mother had gone cliff jumping.

*I want to fly, she'd written. I want to be a bird and feel sunshine in my hair and the wind rushing my face. I want to jump off something higher and defy the laws of*

*gravity. It makes me feel alive. Cliff jumping made me forget.*

It was the same reason I skydived and bungee jumped and rock climbed, to forget when stressed. Feel alive and fly. But my mother had sneered when I'd share my daredevil stunts. I'd assumed it was judgment, her turning her nose up at my choices. That my love of adrenaline rushes had come from my father.

Maybe Mary Hamilton had been jealous, not disapproving. Seeing me and my life could have turned her hate inward, resentment toward herself for giving up on her dreams. There was no way to know, but my mind drifted to August, the man who'd given me this insight. The man I'd left standing in the street.

I wouldn't have read these pages if I'd known my father had died. He'd been right about that. My animosity would have kept me from delving into them. There would have been no point.

But I had, and everything was different now. I was clearer. Calmer. Too calm, like an ocean so flat you could see how stranded you truly were.

August had forgiven me my failings. Sincerity had bled through his declaration of love. His criticism had also been honest. *You push people away when they start to care too much.*

As a teen, I'd let Kayla's claims infect me. She'd preyed on my insecurities, telling me I dragged August down, and I'd been a willing victim. Belief I wasn't good enough for him had propelled me to cut him from my life. And I'd just done the same again, had deemed myself unworthy of his love. My self-loathing may have seemed deeper than that, rooted in our sordid history, his presence in my life destined to be a reminder of my faults. My failures.

Those had just been excuses.

I was hurting him before he could hurt me. Protecting myself. Still believing true happiness was beyond my reach.

My gym session with the girls should have taught me otherwise. Rachel's *Law & Order* performance had pointed out the fullness of my life. My friends. My physical pursuits. My job. So many good things. I'd earned them all, had nurtured my friendships, had worked hard at CrossFit and placing children in loving homes. If I didn't deserve August, that would mean I didn't deserve this goodness, either.

Which was bullshit. Like August had accused.

The childish insecurities I'd thought I'd banished still had power over me, and it wasn't cool.

I would never meet my father because of the hurt I'd inflicted on August, but pushing him away now was more pain he didn't deserve. Pain *I* didn't deserve. Like I hadn't deserved a cold mother and challenging childhood. I was better than that. I'd built myself up since then, physically, emotionally. Yet I'd boomeranged back to those insecurities and had brushed August off.

What had I been thinking?

Except the truth was painfully obvious: I hadn't been thinking. That had been reaction. Knee-jerk. Irrational. Possibly unforgivable.

Desperate to apologize, *again*, I scrambled for my cell phone, only to find the screen blank. *Fuck*.

We'd been out all night. I'd rushed to meet the girls, had then booked a flight and met August. I'd loaned my stupid car-charger to a coworker and had forgotten to get it back. Now I was stuck in my Impreza, outside my late father's house, hesitant to knock on the door or leave.

I could walk up those front steps alone, summon my courage and face whatever greeted me in that house, but all the decisions and outcomes that had led to narrowly missing Ted Mercer's death seemed unbelievably coincidental. As though the confrontation wasn't supposed to happen. Maybe that man's secrets weren't meant to be dredged up, unknown siblings, or not.

That large uncertainty kept me glued to my seat. I needed to talk to my best friend and Badass PI partner, decide on the smart thing to do, but I couldn't reach him. Even worse, he might not answer if I called.

Dead phone clutched in my hand, I plunked my forehead onto my steering wheel.



## AUGUST

Goddamn Gwen for walking away from me. Goddamn me for letting her.

She loved me. That much I knew. When I'd asked her to deny it, her expression had been unmistakable. Her nose hadn't twitched. Her body had leaned toward me. Her lips had parted in longing...and she hadn't uttered the words.

Gwen loved me as much as I loved her, but she was stuck in one of her self-loathing spirals, hating on herself, choosing solitude over connection. Thinking herself unworthy.

Resentment toward her mother surged. Mary may have brought us together through her cryptic letter, but she was the reason Gwen was treading water now, shutting down on me. I'd been worried Gwen wouldn't forgive me for never meeting her father, stealing that precious time from her. In the end, she blamed herself. Typical Gwen. Stubborn Gwen.

And stubborn Gwen was a force to be reckoned with.

This was the girl who'd cut me out of her life with the precision of a neurosurgeon.

Twice.

Still, I should have chased after her. Followed her discreetly, at least. Only an idiot would let his best friend walk into a potentially devastating situation alone. It wasn't right. I should be with her, not leaning on the park bench from her mother's journal.

Gwen's car was long gone. I stood like an idiot, feeling chilled. Lost.

A never-ending line of tourists paid for their Alcatraz tours. I could join them, distract myself for a few hours touring the prison. Instead I searched the bench, as we'd planned. It was fruitless. Mary's name was nowhere to be found, which meant I could have lied to Gwen. I could have continued my ruse and burned the letter. I could be with her now.

Except Owen was right: I'd always know.

I stood and paced. I checked my phone. The screen was blank.

*Fuck.*

With all the running around we'd been doing, I hadn't charged it. Gwen couldn't reach me. I couldn't call her. What if she got to the house and panicked? What if the woman who lived there lashed out at her?

When I'd visited last week, the woman had seemed nice enough: in her forties or fifties, brown curly hair, glasses, wearing a T-shirt that read *I'd rather be gardening*. I'd donned my PI skills and had claimed a client offered Ted Mercer's name to have his driveway repaved. The woman's chin had wobbled when informing me of Ted's passing.

If Gwen told her who she was, that sweet demeanor could shift to sour. Things could get nasty fast. I gripped my phone and cursed under my breath. Screw it. She may not want me with her, but I couldn't let her do this alone.



The street looked the same as it had a week ago. All except for Gwen's gray Impreza parked at the curb. I pulled up behind her. She was in the driver seat, her head bent forward. Was she crying? Had she already been in the house?

I tried to unclick my seat belt and pocket my keys while opening the door. All I managed was to jam my elbow.

Gritting my teeth, I made it out and reached the side of her car in six long strides.

Her tousled hair hung forward, shielding her face. The journal was on her lap, her head firmly planted on her steering wheel. She didn't seem to be breathing.

Worried, I knocked on the driver's window. She jumped so suddenly she whacked *her* elbow on the door. She rubbed her skin and squinted at me. There was a crease on her brow from the steering wheel, moisture in her eyes. She said something I couldn't hear.

I rushed to the passenger side and let myself in, yanking the door shut behind me.

She looked like a sad puppy. "I'm so sorry."

"No, baby. I'm the one who's sorry."

"But you were right. I pushed you away again, for the same stupid reasons I did as a kid, thinking you'd be better off without me. That I didn't deserve you."

"You deserve everything. And you heard my albums—those hate songs? The sad ones? That's what happens when I'm without you. That's not better, Gwen. *You* make me better."

Her chin trembled. "I shouldn't have lashed out at you."

"I kind of deserved it." Remorse still emanated from her. Only one thing would erase it. I reached over and ran my thumb down the sweet dent in her brow line. "If you're at fault here, then you need my forgiveness, which I can offer, under one condition."

She bit her lip, waiting.

"You forgive yourself first."

Tears pooled in her eyes. Not enough to spill, but her strife was potent. An internal battle waging. Like Gwen, I was my worst critic at times, hating songs that fans loved, kicking myself for concert blunders. Reliving arguments where I should have said this or done that on an angry loop in my

head. Accepting ourselves, fuck-ups and all, was no easy feat. Particularly tough when no one taught you how.

I waited.

She sniffled, soft words following. “I have a great life and great friends. A job I adore. Then you came roaring back into my life, and I was that teenager again, feeling damaged and just...not good enough. Not because of you, but when things got complicated, it was so easy to fall back into that role. Hate myself for choices I couldn’t change. Like those insecurities were there, waiting for me.”

I stroked the length of her hair. “They’ll never fully go away. It’s who you are. Like I’ll always be a fixer, wanting to take over and do before asking. My job is to try and hit pause before I act. Yours is to remember how fulfilling your life is, because you’re that woman, too.” Strong. Determined. Sexy as hell.

“Yeah.” She nodded, the movement gaining strength with each lift of her chin. “I am. And I forgive myself.”

A rough sigh pushed from my chest, warmth incinerating my chill from earlier. Thank God my cell had died. If it hadn’t, I could be touring Alcatraz right now, wishing for solitary confinement. I released her cheek and glanced at her father’s home. “Did you go in?”

She shook her head.

“You nervous?” She shook her head again, but her lips moved imperceptibly. I’d forgotten about her silly nervous tic. “I think you are. You’re doing your thing.”

“What thing?”

“That weird movie title thing.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

Color pinked her cheeks.

“Your lips were moving, Possum. What word did you use?”

She rolled her eyes and let her head fall onto the headrest. “Sex.”

Now was not the time to laugh. I couldn't muffle the sound. “You're nervous about introducing yourself to your father's family, and you're reciting movie titles with the word *sex*?”

“I can't even believe I'm doing that stupid game again, but then you show up with your stupid hair and stupid face and stupid body.” She gestured absently toward me. “It's the first word that came up. But don't get any ideas. There will be no more sex.”

I couldn't have heard her right. “Like *ever*?”

She deflated, sprawling as much as she could on her seat. “I don't know. I'm a walking disaster. We've been dating less than a day, and I just broke up with you. I might have siblings. My father is dead. Everything in my life is changing too fast.”

“So just, like, not this minute? In the car?”

She punched me lightly in the stomach. “You know what I mean, August. I need my best friend right now.”

I caught her hand and held it. I did know. She needed a breather. Time to process. Our remaining seconds wouldn't be spent tangled in bed. There was no curbing my disappointment, but being her best friend meant the world. I kissed her hand. “Whatever you need, honey.”

She brushed her knuckles against my lips, back and forth. The soft touch slipped through my bloodstream, heating my skin. She may have said no sex, but my body had its own agenda. I tensed my thighs. It didn't help. If I had to choose one word Gwen inspired it would be *fever*.

Heat from one look. Fire from one touch. Warmth from one word.

My next song would be titled, “Fever Junkie.”

She glanced past me, toward the house. “I get why you waited to tell me, how hard it was to face me after all those years. I also can't stop thinking about how defining that was,

like everything the past day: the journal, us reuniting, learning about my mom. So I've been sitting here, stewing over impossible things like fate and destiny, wondering if I wasn't meant to meet my father."

The center console kept me from pulling her into my arms. I wasn't sure she'd want that anyway. I settled on weaving our fingers together. "I've never put much stock in the idea of ghosts or the unexplainable, but I do believe in fate, and there's no denying the events the past couple months have felt...preordained?"

"So it's not just me?"

"It's not just you. It still doesn't excuse what I did. I'm sick about not telling you your dad's name sooner."

"I know you are." She fiddled with my fingers, ran her thumb over my sparse knuckle hair. "It happened, though. Your fault, my fault, *my mother's fault*—the reason doesn't matter. This is the fallout, which brings us back to reality."

I studied the red door that had her gnawing her lip. "The woman I met was nice, if that helps. She seemed sweet."

Gwen released a half-groan, half-sigh. "I want to knock on that door eventually, but maybe not now. I want to follow the journal today, learn what I'm dealing with first. Try and discover what happened between my parents. I think I'm supposed to follow those clues."

I inched closer to her. "Can I come on this journey?"

I didn't ask where we stood. The no-sex rule could mean she was pulling away, compartmentalizing our relationship into friendship. Best friends. Just friends. Friends who eventually drifted. There was a chance we'd say goodbye tomorrow and never see each other again. If that happened, I'd write a lifetime of sad songs. It wasn't an option.

She focused on me, and love glimmered in her eyes, giving me hope. "I think you're supposed to come," she whispered.

I traced her cheekbone, the smooth slope of her jaw. History and hurt and hope rippled between us. Then I said, "And you're sure there won't be any sex?"

A guy had to try. Plus the best way to keep Gwen from anxiously repeating movie titles was to flirt with her, or annoy her. Both had worked as teens.

That (sort of) joke earned me a smile. “Keep your smolder on lockdown, Cruz.”

“Anything for you, Frances.”

Her expression morphed from amused to livid. “No, you did not.”

“Oh, yes, I did.” This was the annoy tactic. Her hated middle name had never let me down before.

Her breathing slowed. Her focus dropped to my chest. “Say it again.”

“Frances.”

She pinched my nipple and twisted. “Jesus fuck, Gwen.” Wincing, I batted her hand away. “What the hell?”

“You know I hate that name.”

“It’s a fine name.”

“It’s the worst name.”

It was also the main character’s given name in her favorite movie. “But then I’m allowed to say, ‘Nobody puts Baby in the corner.’”

Her lips twitched. “You are such a child.”

And she was distracted. Too bad my nipple had taken a hit for the team. I’d do it again, though. Anything for this woman, except walk away from her. There was no way I was leaving tomorrow without knowing we were good. Together. A couple. More lyrics looped through my mind, lines filled with words like *passion* and *addiction* and *forever*, those “Fever Junkie” verses building into a ballad.

Yet there was still a chance I’d lose her.

For now, I’d play by her rules. Shielding my chest, I pulled the diary from her lap. “Where’d you leave off?”



---

12:30 P.M.

11 ½ HOURS...



GWEN

I dove back into my mother's diary, still sluggish, but the underwater fog had lifted. Thanks to my Badass PI partner.

I wasn't sure I could continue at our frantic pace: twenty-four hours of passionate sex, talks, jokes, and promises, pretending our uncertain future and messy past didn't affect our seconds. Too many conflicting emotions had been set loose. But having him here was a start.

Forgiving myself was a milestone.

The loss of my father still lingered like a nasty sliver, the kind you struggled to remove. Having never known Ted Mercer meant it couldn't burrow deeper.

I had, however, known my mother. I was *getting to know her*.

Learning what had happened between them was top priority. My new birthday wish. To understand her, prove I hadn't been the root of her despair. Which meant this search would provide me closure, like August had said.

With him beside me, I read more pages, each one teeming with teenage angst. Nothing hinted at an unplanned pregnancy or painful breakup, but she had written an entry about babysitting and shitty diapers and not understanding why people had kids. It was a glimpse of the mother I'd known, the

one who'd never wanted children. Not new information, but reading it still stung.

Then the writing changed.

The entries weren't dated, but a page had been skipped and a different pen was used. These lines had been jotted down one at a time, across the page on a diagonal, as though written frantically. My anxiety mounted with each word.

*I never really knew him.*

*He'll never know about the baby.*

*In one night, they stole it all from me.*

I didn't know who "they" was, but dread clawed up my neck. He'd truly never known about me, the choice stolen from him because he'd hurt my mother. He'd done something bad with someone, my affair theory gaining steam. I flipped the page but found it blank. I flipped back and forth faster, the stuck ones almost ripping until I discovered one more written entry.

*Secrets kill the soul. Both are now buried with my heart, on a hill, at the red rock where our baby was conceived.*

That was it. Nothing else was written, but the words *secrets* and *kill* escalated my worry. The pages fluttered under my rapid breaths.

I'd known a major event had split my parents apart. Growing up, discovering the source had never been my priority. I'd been focused on finding my father, then the possibility of meeting a sibling. Whatever dramatic event had altered the course of my life had only been a background whisper.

It was screaming now.

August eased the book from my grasp and read the two passages. “It sounds like she’s talking about the lookout point, Tank Hill—I’m guessing that’s where you were conceived.”

Where August and I had slept last night. Where sex had happened. “Do you think she actually buried something there?”

“It’s cryptic, but possible.” He studied the diary, leaned so close his nose was practically in the book. “Pages are missing, a few cut out after her last note.”

I ran my fingers along the seams. The cuts were so clean they were barely noticeable. “If she removed these, believed she had to hide something, she could have buried them.”

She’d obviously enjoyed keeping a diary, had found the process cathartic. She would likely have detailed the events that had destroyed her heart. She might have buried them as a symbolic way to move on.

*Secrets.*

*Kill.*

My chill worsened.

“A time capsule,” August murmured, probably recalling the two of us digging up his back yard to bury ours. “You think Barbie-Man is in hers, too?”

I elbowed him, thankful for his humor. “Barbie-Man isn’t there, but I have a feeling my answers are.”

He moved to close the journal, but he stopped and squinted. “I think there’s...” Using both hands, he pried apart two corners I hadn’t realized had been stuck. “Something’s written here.”

I pulled his hands and the diary toward me. A small block of text was on the page:

*I hope eleven years isn’t too late.*

Below that vague line was contact information: one of those random email addresses that could belong to anyone

(fancyfeathers123@hotmail.com), a phone number, and a Denver address.

“It’s like she wrote that to a specific person,” August said. “The other entries are more personal.”

I didn’t reply. Eleven years—something about the number rang a bell. I closed my eyes, ran through all I’d learned the past two days, fragments spinning, blurring. They rolled and rolled, until...

“The Greyhound employee.” I clutched August’s thigh. “He said the suitcase went missing in 2001. The diary and contents were from 1990. That’s eleven years.”

Like two synchronized swimmers, we turned our heads in time, slowly lowered our eyes to reread the new page. August tapped the journal’s edge. “Not sure what it means, but I think you’re right. The two timelines have to be connected.”

“More questions,” I mumbled, but the answers felt closer.

“We could call the number and see who picks up.”

I shook my head. “If that number was my mother’s, a secret cell or something, she won’t be picking up. If it belongs to someone else, I’d rather be prepared for whoever might answer. We should follow the other clue first, the one that mentions the hill.” Continue on the journal’s path.

We closed the book, the weight of its final clues thickening the air between us. Air already heavy with our personal tension. August was allowing me to set our pace, determine our course. Problem was, I vacillated between wanting to slow things down and fast-forward to jumping his bones, his impending departure hovering above it all.

*Freaks and Geeks. Freak Show. Freaky Friday.*

Dammit, I was doing it again.

He snickered at me. “I’ll meet you there. Actually, I’ll beat you there because my way is faster.”

“You’re delusional.”

“I’m right. I also plan to kiss you before I leave this car.”

“August...”

“Just a small one, Possum. There will be no sex.”

He invaded my space, ran his nose up my cheek. My belly swooped in a shivery rush. He was doing his best to distract me, like he’d done as kids. It was him being the fixer, but I didn’t sense the pity I’d witnessed back then—him making me his project. There was sadness behind his playful banter, empathy in his soft gaze.

As always with him, my mind quieted. All freaking out ceased.

Closing my eyes, I turned my head toward him. It was the only direction it could go. His lips brushed my cheek, by the corner of my mouth. His nose fitted alongside mine. Our lips lined up, and so, so softly he kissed me, a slight opening of his lips to capture mine. Our eyelashes fluttered together. His breath tickled my tongue. Heaven was built on kisses like this.

He pulled back, and I barely refrained from reaching for him and demanding more. I had firsthand experience with August’s kissing mastery, and the man was holding out, teasing me by rationing his skill. It wasn’t fair. He knew it would break my resolve. But we had a time capsule to unearth. A secret to discover. And we were losing time.



Although we were still alone, the lookout was less romantic during the day. San Francisco sprawled in all its glory below, but no stars lit the sky. The sleepy quiet of night had been replaced with movement. Cars. Birds. City sounds.

August and I stood side-by-side like we had not long ago, the backs of our hands touching. “I hit traffic,” he said, still moaning that I’d beaten him here.

“Don’t be a sore loser.”

“My way’s faster. In a scientific study, I’d win.”

“But you didn’t. And you’re wrong.”

“We’ll do it again tonight.”

“We have birthday drinks tonight.”

Our last night together. I wasn’t sure I wanted to spend it with my friends this year. A daunting decision. If I ditched them on our shared birthday, Ainsley would mix Tabasco sauce in my toothpaste, but I kept spinning things with August in my mind, fear overtaking my hurt. The idea of him leaving with us in limbo, our status unclear, was worse than getting a mouthful of hot sauce.

If I asked him to spend the night with me alone, take the time to work things out, he’d say yes. He might tell me he loved me again.

Would I find the courage to say it back?

He stood beside me now, taking in the view. His arm wasn’t around my shoulder. He wasn’t bathing me in his sultry voice. The inches between us stretched into miles, because I’d imposed another rule: the no sex rule. Like my seconds rule. Weak attempts to control the uncontrollable while my life unraveled.

The harder I tried to slow things down, the faster my imagination rolled forward. It tripped ahead, painting a picture of our imagined future, *my future* and the babies I wanted to have one day, how I ached for a kid with his unruly cowlicks and my determination. Our shared sense of humor. I was ready before, to try long distance with August. Then life threw me another curve ball.

Here I was again, placing my hand on my belly, wishing for a second heartbeat inside me. A child created by us.

“If you keep looking at me like that, Possum, sex will happen.” August’s husky voice broke my trance.

I swallowed and stepped back, unaware I’d been staring. “Like what?”

He stalked closer and dipped his head to my level. “Like you love me.”

I sucked in a strangled breath. That was a sneak attack. A low blow.

I couldn't deny the claim.

He shook his head, hands held in surrender. "Forget I said that. We're here for your mother's time capsule. Not us. Let's get searching."

He smiled, as though unruffled by my brush-off, but he couldn't fool me. Not with the tightness around his hazel eyes, the sharp angle of his jaw. Keeping him at a distance was supposed to help me cope with today's troubling events. It had seemed the safer option. In truth, it was making everything harder.

He was ahead of me, circling the large tree crowning the hill. Last night's swing, the one we'd sat on while covered in ketchup and mustard, dangled from a branch. My mother's diary had mentioned a red rock, a landmark for our treasure hunt. August searched the area, then dropped into a squat and brushed at the earth.

He licked his thumb and rubbed a rock. "If she buried something, this could be the spot."

I approached slowly, dread clutching at my ankles. As sure as I was destiny had played a part in recent events, I was equally as positive she *had* buried something, and whatever it was would change my life. This wasn't meeting my father, who may or may not have been an asshole. This was discovering a secret buried for twenty-eight years.

I made it to August's side and peered over his shoulders. "It looks like a red rock."

He picked up a hefty stick, examined its tip. "You helping me dig?"

I nodded and found a flat rock. The effort distracted me from August and all I wanted to tell him, and from the entombed truths I wasn't sure I was ready to learn.

The earth was dry and flinty, hard packed. Digging was an effort. I dropped to my knees, put more muscle into it. August copied my pose, the two of us sweating in minutes. I dug

harder, faster. The rock tore at my hands. I ignored the cuts, didn't bother swatting the couple flies circling my head. Sweat dripped into my eyes. August was as disheveled.

Then I hit something.

We froze and traded nervous looks. Just as quickly, we dug a wider ring, like a couple of archeologists unearthing fossils. A black box had been buried, my history captured in time. By the time we'd loosened it, dirt was caked under my nails, and I was messy again. A pattern with August and me. He took over, gently raising the keepsake.

We sat on the nearby grass, the box placed between us. I shoved my hands under my thighs. "I guess this is it."

He wiped his forehead, smearing dirt across his brow. He nudged the box toward me. "It's yours to open."

I didn't budge. All I could see was August, this man who was dirty and sweaty, all to help me. He'd forgiven my unforgivable WTF, had confessed his love. He made me feel more alive than surfing waves or scaling rocks. Whatever was in the box would change me, a twenty-eight-year-old secret that could rattle my world. But August steadied me. I'd wanted his support today. Not Rachel or Ainsley's. His. He'd been a part of me forever.

"August?" I couldn't touch that box without knowing we were okay.

He tilted his head, an ocean of affection swimming in his eyes. "Yeah?"

"Thank you." I didn't get into his choice to withhold my father's name or my blame in that decision, or explain my statement. He was here, with me. Supporting me. Relationships were hard. There was good and bad, plummets and exhilaration—a roller coaster without a safety bar. We were proof of that, as was the love blazing inside me, still fierce after our screw-ups.

His warm gaze swept over my face and his brow crumpled. "I love you, Gwen. I know you don't want to hear this now, but I can't keep it in. Not with all that box represents. Not for

a million reasons. But you need to know and believe that I love you. I'm here for you, no matter what happens."

He'd said the words before, but they meant more now, after our turbulent reunion: we were strong enough to move past our painful mistakes. He was my best friend, the only man or boy I'd ever loved. He'd made my childhood bearable and had given me more joy the past two days than I'd experienced in years. Not because I hadn't been happy. I loved my life and my friends. This was more than happy, though, bigger and brighter.

He was the reason my sun would rise tomorrow.

It was how my mother had mooned about my father, before he'd hurt her. And like her, I couldn't form the words. The fire in my throat burned them up.

Instead, I said the worst thing. The crazy Gwen thing.

I looked at the love of my life, and said, "I hate that I'm on the pill."

August became a statue. "What did you say?"

I tried to rewind and eat my words. *I hate that I'm on the pill.* Only an idiot would blurt that raw truth. An absolute moron. I closed my eyes, hoping I'd disappear.

"I can still see you, Gwen. What did you say?"

"I hate that I'm on this pill?" The lie came out like a question.

He crawled toward me, forcing me to lie back. The intense lines of his face could cut glass. "No. No. That's not what you said."

I tried to shove him off, but his hands and knees caged me. I shimmied, but he didn't budge. "Finding the box got to my head, made me dizzy. Being up here feels too high."

"You jump out of airplanes and off bridges. You're trying to tell me lying safely on the ground is suddenly giving you a fear of heights? Try again."

He might love me. That didn't mean he wanted to hear about my ticking biological clock. Talk of babies was a fast track to losing the guy, but there was no escaping him or what I'd blurted. I quit wriggling and groaned. "After we had sex in my apartment, the first thing I thought was that I wished I wasn't on the pill. I wanted you to come inside me. I wanted us to join in every way possible. Make a baby. So I could have a piece of you forever. I'm sorry. I know how it sounds, and we've—"

His lips descended on mine, swallowing my embarrassed babbling. Our desperate moans mingled. I tugged his hair. He sucked on my bottom lip, each taste deeper than the last. Our tongues licked and slid restlessly.

Once. Again. *More, more, more.*

This wasn't the sweet kiss that built heaven. This was the kiss that sent well-meaning people to hell.

His lips moved in a carnal rhythm, erotic and panty-melting. A rock dug into my back. I didn't care. We were at it again, dry-fucking like kids in a lookout spot. This time in broad daylight.

He came up for air, panting. "Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I want us to have a baby."

"You can't be serious."

"You have no idea how serious I am." He pressed his erection into me, right where I ached.

I liked his serious a whole lot. "You want a baby?"

"No. Not a baby. I want *our* baby. I want us. A family. God, I love you. I've loved you forever. I've never wanted anything this much, Gwen."

A baby. Our baby. "Seriously?"

"Ask me again, I'll tell you again."

I pressed my knees into his hips, keeping him close, wanting him closer. "We haven't even been on a proper date.

Baby talk goes against all pre-first-date rules.”

“There are no rules with us, Possum. How many times do I have to tell you that? And I don’t want a baby tomorrow, but you’re it for me. The possibility of having a future with you? A family? That’s all I need.”

“I love you.” My harshly whispered promise caught me off-guard.

“My girl,” he crooned. We breathed in sync, and I inhaled his soapy man scent, a hint of spice mixing with the dirt below us. I didn’t want to move from this spot—under him, with him, safe in his arms. He lifted up suddenly, intent in his stunning eyes. “I’m going to marry you one day, Gwen Hamilton.”

I bit my lip as my eyes filled. My pulse pounded in my ears. This beat the rush of flying alongside an eagle or conquering my CrossFit goals. It was adrenaline on steroids. I was so far gone for this man...still and always.

I slipped my hands up the back of his shirt, splayed my palms on his heated skin. The planes of his muscles tightened. It was the wrong move. Our heavy petting accelerated to groping, neither of us able to hit the brakes. He fitted his hand under my ass, tilted me up while thrusting, the thick denim between us infuriating. We should stop. We should breathe. I reached for his belt buckle.

And a childish screech sliced through the air.

We flew apart, breathing hard. A blond boy with a model airplane crested the hill, pumping his pudgy legs while flying his toy. I licked my lips, tasting August and his promise to marry me one day. *God*. His eyes were as dark as I’d ever seen them. My body burned, sensitive and swollen.

The boy’s parents followed shortly, casting wary glances our way. Not that I blamed them. We looked homeless again, covered in dirt, clothes askew.

August straightened his T-shirt and motioned to the box. “We should probably focus on this.” Still, he eyed me hungrily and adjusted himself in his jeans.

That move ruined me. We should open the box, but I only had one night left with him. Whatever was in there would change everything. I kept picturing *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and ghosts ripping through the air, sucking the life out of all who dared lay eyes on the ark of the covenant. I was pretty sure I wouldn't turn into a liquefied skeleton, but the contents we unearthed could devastate me, ruin my last moments with August. As desperately as I wanted answers, the box would be here tomorrow. Unfortunately, he wouldn't.

I needed one night with him, an afternoon even, before I unleashed my mother's secrets. "Will you meet me?" I asked, suddenly tentative. "At my place."

"You'd rather open it there?"

"I'd rather shower with you there. I'll deal with the box later."

His Adam's apple bobbed down his tanned throat. "I'll drive your way," he said. "I think it's faster."



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2:30 P.M.

9 ½ HOURS...



GWEN

We didn't kiss the second we entered my apartment. Our clothes didn't fly off. We didn't hit the floor and dry-fuck like horny teens.

Soft brushes had replaced our frantic fumbling: his hand on my hip as I opened my door, my fingers gliding along his forearm when he hung back to close it, his lips on my hair as I placed the box on my kitchen counter. We moved in slow motion, stretching our seconds to make them last. A shower was still in order.

He followed me into my bathroom and started poking through my stuff.

“What do you think you're doing?” I asked.

“Investigating.”

“Why?”

He shrugged a shoulder and kept nosing through my drawers. *Creeper*. His PI skills led him to my stash of condoms, lube, and the waterproof vibrator I'd purchased the night drunk Rachel had dragged Ainsley and me into a sex shop. The videoed Dildo Incident was saved on my phone.

Smirking, he held up my pink pleasure toy. “This could be fun.”

“You have no idea.”

He hummed appreciatively and placed it on the counter. My birth control was in the same drawer. He picked it up and spun it in his hand. “I was serious before, about wanting a family with you one day. But there’s no going back from that. We both have to be all in, no matter what happens.” His attention drifted to his right, as though scrutinizing my glassed-in shower.

His true focus was on my kitchen, connected to the other side of that white tile wall. Where my mother’s secret box lay. He wanted assurances its contents wouldn’t turn us into liquefied skeletons.

All I could offer was my honesty. “Having a child with you would be...everything. Thinking about it, even theoretically, makes my heart feel like it might explode. So sign me up for that future, August. I’m all in. For now, I want you before I detonate that bomb in there. I want to touch you and make love to you, no other drama between us.” I flattened my palm on his firm chest, connecting us. “I have this feeling everything will change after I open that box, which means I’ll need you more than ever.”

*And you can’t hurt me,* I refrained from adding.

“I may be leaving the country, but I’m not leaving you. Never again.”

“So we’re really doing this? You and me, long distance?”

Still holding my pills, his arm came around my back, the heavy pressure of his palm burning through my tank top. “It’s just us now, Gwen. We come before everything. That’s how we’ll make it work.”

“I can do that.”

“Don’t freak out on me.”

“Don’t flirt with groupies.”

“Don’t sleep with my brother.”

I gasped, and his lips quirked to the side. “Too soon?”

My sputtering laugh was answer enough. “Definitely too soon.”

Gaze locked on mine, he returned my birth control to my drawer, eyes burning with intent. To one day have a child. To build a future together. A home.

All I'd ever wanted.

I threaded my fingers through his thick, black hair, pressed to my tiptoes, and kissed him slow and deep. He trailed his knuckles along my cheek, my jaw, my neck, never disconnecting his lips from mine. I traced the hard lines of his ribs, slipped his T-shirt over his head. Mine fell next to his in the same unhurried rhythm. We were on cruise control, taking our time, enjoying every curve along the ride.

His callused fingers drew tender lines around my bra, over my lace-covered nipples, coaxing them into stiff peaks. My hips moved, rocking automatically. His mirrored mine, an erotic dance to a tune only we could hear. Actually, no. There was a tune, a soft hum coming from August, so delicate I barely heard it.

“Are you singing to me?” I dropped to my knees, helped him out of his jeans. I removed his briefs. My mouth watered as his erection sprang free. His shaft was thick, flushed, the strong vein on the underside begging to be licked.

I peered up. The desire in his heavy-lidded gaze hit me between my thighs as he ran his strong hand through my hair. “You’ve always inspired my music. Can’t help but compose when I’m with you.”

I palmed his erection, brought it to my cheek, brushed it back and forth. The silk-hard feel of him was irresistible. A glorious groan hit my ears.

“I know the words to all your songs,” I said.

“I want to know the words to all of yours.” Grit laced his deepening voice.

It was an odd thing to say, considering my song-writing skills were up there with my whistling ability, but I understood what he meant. We were composing a symphony of short sharp breaths and longer sighs, guttural pants and dirty grunts

as I took his gorgeous cock into my mouth. Our own love album.

“Fuck, Gwen.” He moved with me, gliding in out of my mouth. Not fast and rough. A slow slide, each one hitting the back of my throat, so deep I almost gagged. I wanted to take him deeper, though, give him more pleasure. The most. Drown him in it. My own desire pooled between my thighs.

I dragged one hand around his tense thigh, dug my fingers into his clenched ass. A strangled breath hissed from deep in his chest. “Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. Stop.”

His slick cock fell from my mouth, and I licked my swollen lips, loving the taste of August Cruz. “You’re saying fuck a lot again.”

“You inspire profanity, and you’re about to make me come too soon.”

He yanked me up and tugged my jeans down. I reached to undo my bra, but he slapped my ass. “This goes slow.” A statement. A command.

I’d never been so wet.

He dragged my thong over my legs, dropping kisses in its wake. He attended to my bra next, lavishing my breasts with the same reverent attention before sliding lower. My knees weakened in the best way. I gripped the meaty parts of his shoulders, smiled at the cowlick in his hair. The one I’d tug when watching TV, to annoy him, to get his attention, to pretend I didn’t love my best friend.

“Spread your legs, baby.” Words I’d never thought I’d hear him say.

He pushed me against my shower, kneeled, then hooked one of my legs over his shoulder. He trailed his tongue in a mind-numbing slide. The move was excruciatingly slow. He did it again, and again. I whimpered. I tried to move my hips, desperate for him to lick faster, press harder.

He chuckled against me. “So impatient.”

I was about to tell him where to shove his impatience, but he clamped his lips on me and sucked while moving his head. “*Fuck, fuck, fuck,*” was all I managed.

Our limited sex vocabulary.

My hands were somewhere in his hair, my heart was somewhere in the clouds. We were somewhere in the world, but I had no clue where.

This. Just this. “That fucking spot.”

A purely male sound rumbled from him. He took my cue, concentrating his efforts where I needed him. His fingers joined the party, pleasure building. He was everywhere: inside my body, promising me a future, reminding me of my past.

Regardless of our mistakes or what lay ahead, we’d cope. We’d always return to each other. That security had my body relaxing, enough to shape my orgasm, fuzzy edges that sharpened. *Good. This. Yes. More.*

“Don’t you dare stop.”

He pumped his fingers and held me steady against his face. The next lick sent me bucking. I let go in a rush, nearly yanked out his hair as I came. The aftershocks ravaged me.

Gently, he lowered my leg, kissed the curls between my thighs. “You’re amazing.”

“I think I’m supposed to say that to you.”

“You can say it after we make love in the shower.”

He worked his way up my body, stopping to knead my breasts, suck on my nipples. I was even wetter than before, uncharacteristic for me. Some women could go for rounds, rack up orgasms faster than a credit card bill. I was happy to have sex after a guy went down on me, but more so he could get off. A thank you for his hard work. Not with August.

I wanted him inside me, moving with me. Filling me. Over and over.

He turned the shower on while rubbing his erection against my belly. He nestled his thigh between my legs, the two of us

grinding on each other. Then we were under the hot spray, kissing, stroking, but savoring, too. Not rushing to join. I followed the water that sluiced over the lean planes of his chest, each crevice of his abdomen, the defined bones of his hips. I sucked his length again and bit his thigh.

He moved behind me, exploring my spine while I splayed my hands on the cold wet tile. Hot water plastered my hair to my neck. August squeezed my ass and moved lower, tongued my crease. A tease before dipping farther south and kissing the backs of my thighs and knees.

Knees shouldn't be erotic. Neither should elbows or ribs. August's devout attention turned every inch of flesh into a G-spot. An E-spot. An R-spot.

New spots, each with the power to blind me.

"Now," I murmured, dizzy with desire. "I need you now."

"Now," he agreed, pulling my legs back slightly.

Still behind me, his thickness brushed my ass. I sensed him bend his knees to line up with my entrance. It wasn't low enough. I lifted to my tiptoes, but one of my feet slipped. His knee hit the shower wall.

"Shit."

"Fuck."

"Ow."

"Oof."

I fell backward into him, laughing. "Shower sex is not our forté."

He caught me around the waist. "Everything with you is perfect."

We wound up on the floor again, half in the shower, half out, still grinning, the water still running. I straddled his hips, couldn't believe August Cruz was smiling up at me, laughter and love in his eyes. "Perfect," he said again.

I lifted up, guided him below me, and lowered myself down. We both sighed, but my exhale was louder. It was full

of this moment and all I wanted: to be with August, make a baby one day, a girl or boy who we'd raise in a loving home, here or abroad. Even if we had to spend time apart, we'd make it work. I wouldn't let my insecurities rule me. I'd give that child everything I never had. With August.

I circled my hips and went to lift up and show him my heart with tender loving, our bodies meant to be joined, but he gripped my hips. "Wait."

I squirmed. "Why?"

"I've never felt this." His pupils had blown wide with intensity.

I traced his wet nose. "Felt what?"



## AUGUST

Gwen was straddling me, surrounding me, all her wet heat fisting my cock, and I struggled to explain my need to hit pause. I'd experienced this base pleasure with women before, the burn before the release. But I was still amused by mine and Gwen's fumbled shower sex attempt, how I'd loved tripping over her and winding up on the floor—again. There was no awkward moment. No hesitancy or embarrassment.

And I was bare in her. We wouldn't try for a baby until we were solid, but being nestled in her, balls deep, at peace yet rock hard, imagining our future and coming inside her soon: I just couldn't find the words.

I gathered my breath and did the best I could. "I didn't know what love was until you."

Laughter. Fumbles. Fuck-ups. Forgiveness. And this fever. This hot, thick lust waiting to explode because of the woman who'd taught me the meaning of life.

"Then love me," she said, rocking on me as much as I'd let her.

We lived in the pause, the shower making a mess of her bathroom, Gwen making a mess of my heart. I wouldn't have it any other way. Then I let her move. I palmed her breasts, watched greedily as her head tipped back and lips dropped open. I slid my hands down her body, supported her hips, met her each time she lowered. Still slow, still drawing out our pleasure.

The longest seconds in history.

I flipped her on her back, inching us farther out of the shower. On my knees, I canted her hips and thrust into her again, deeper than before. I watched each slow drag of my cock pulling out and pushing in. Fire shot up my thighs. "Wish you could see how beautiful you are." Her tight, glistening pussy swallowing my length.

"We'll video it next time."

Possessiveness surged through me at the notion. My girl, on camera for me. Something to enjoy when we're apart. "Damn right, we will."

I pumped into her harder, faster, deeper. I fell forward, ground my pelvis where she needed me. She caught her breath each time we connected, dug her fingers into my back. I sucked on her neck, wanted to leave a mark. A tattoo. A permanent reminder of who loved her, no matter what that box brought.

She may have said we'd work through anything, that she'd put us first, but that box was a wild card. It could alter everything.

We had now, at least. This incomprehensible perfection on a wet floor, her nearby birth control a reminder of our pledge. Just us. We'd always come first.

My orgasm threatened to rip down my spine, building, building.

Her knees dug into my sides. "I'm so..."

"Me, too."

"You feel..."

“So fucking good.”

Her first contraction squeezed me so hard, I spasmed. She cried out—the sexiest song I’d ever heard. My grunts followed, her name mixing with the sounds as I pumped harder and spilled into her, blinding bursts that never seemed to end. We both shuddered.

“We’re on the floor again,” she said into my neck and held me closer.

“A very wet floor.” Which meant we couldn’t linger. “Cuddling will have to wait.” I kissed her deeply, then lifted up.

She touched where we were joined as I pulled out, an erotic move that had me wanting to plunge back into her. “I’m not done with you yet,” I said. “I’ll shut off the shower. Meet me in the bedroom.”

Round two had her ass in the air, my chest pressed to her back, a soft mattress finally below us. I couldn’t drag out my pleasure long enough, loved learning every rhythm and angle that made her moan. It was a rougher affair. Skin slapping. More *fucks* shouted as my orgasm winded me. She claimed I’d turned her into jelly.

I kissed the back of her neck afterward, stayed in her as long as possible. “Not sure how I’ll live without this.” I shouldn’t mention my impending departure, but there was no point denying the inevitable.

She pushed her hips back into me. “Our reunion will be so sweet.”

The comment was lighthearted, but there was no disguising the break in her voice.

Needing to see her face, I pulled out and cleaned us up with a towel. Gwen’s bedroom was simple and neat. Blue-gray walls, a gym bag on the floor, laundry basket, fitness and outdoor magazines on her dresser. There was one photo, a candid of her with Rachel and Ainsley. Her friends, not her family. I wanted my picture here, too, to be her family. She

was already that for me, but Gwen had always searched for more. Pined for it.

More reason the box in the kitchen could hurt her, and us.

I wanted to lounge under the sheets together, forget the world for the rest of the day, but I needed to know what I was dealing with. It was her birthday, too. We had plans with her friends. Last thing I wanted was to upend Gwen's life more than I already had, especially when I was taking off tomorrow. She'd need her friends more than ever.

I crawled onto the bed, grabbed her hand, and lifted her to sitting. I kissed her nose. "I think it's time."

"To have sex again?"

Sneaky little vixen. "If I was twenty, maybe, but this old man needs a break. And we have a box to open."

"Old-schmold," she mumbled. Her silliness drained as she picked her nails. "Will you bring it in here? Actually"—she gripped my wrist as though I'd slip away—"what did my mother mean in her note, when she wrote: *Remember what I told you on Gwen's birthday?*"

With all we'd been through, I'd forgotten about that detail. "I called her, to get your address, and she said the wildest thing."

"What did she say?" Gwen looked like she was holding her breath.

"She said that you loved me. Told me not to let you push me away."

"My *mother* said that?"

"Shocked the hell out of me."

It was also one of the reasons I'd caught Gwen with Finch. A couple times that fateful night, I'd questioned if I should let things lie with Gwen, not get in any deeper. Then I'd replay Mary's words and had eventually followed my gut. Walking in on Gwen and my brother had been the shittiest day of my life, but I'd believed it was supposed to happen. Like finding this journal, following the clues. That brutal event had given me

my career. It gave me this time with Gwen. If we'd gotten together back then, we might not have lasted.

I snuck another kiss while she absorbed that confession, then pulled on my briefs and retrieved the keepsake. I cleaned the dirt from it before returning to Gwen.

She sat cross-legged on the bed, still picking her nails, wearing nothing but a thin tank top...and four-leaf-clover boxers. My lucky boxers. The ones she'd stolen. They looked fucking amazing on her.

I settled across from her, placed the keepsake beside me. "I see my boxers survived your sniffing."

A sweet blush highlighted her cheeks. "They're comfy."

They were downright sexy. I blinked, wishing my eyes were a camera, capable of capturing the simplicity of a blushing Gwen, on her bed, bare legs folded, wearing my boxers.

"You can steal my underwear any time." She could have my whole damn wardrobe, as long as she was mine. I moved her mother's time capsule between us. A possible live grenade. "Whatever's in here, we'll get through it."

She quit picking her nails and switched to chewing her lip. She nodded noncommittally. Whatever her mother had buried would hit Gwen hard. There was no shouldering that burden for her. All I could do was love her hard and be her rock. That didn't keep my heart from racing.



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4:00 P.M.

8 HOURS...



GWEN

Still shaken up over my mother's words to August, I didn't reach for the box right away. How had a woman who'd barely paid me a lick of attention known I'd loved my best friend? Why would she have shown *him* a hint of her affection toward me, when all I'd ever received was a cold shoulder?

She'd pushed us together on my nineteenth birthday, and again while she'd been dying. She had known me well enough to predict I'd push August away. Yet during her illness, we couldn't talk without fighting.

It didn't make sense, but I didn't have the energy to unwind that aggravating knot.

Unable to delay any longer, I snuck my fingers under the box's fitted lid. It took three tries to loosen it. August had obviously cleaned the exterior, but trapped dirt—*twenty-eight-year-old dirt*—spilled out as I shimmied it up. The mess went unnoticed. I couldn't focus on much besides the mysterious contents.

A gold locket was wedged in a corner. Papers that matched the diary were folded at one side, a tiny stuffed bear lodged between them.

Three things. All this stress over three little things.

I lifted the bear first, the least worrisome object. Who didn't love stuffed animals? This cutie was purple with a white

muzzle and black nose, a darker purple ribbon tied around its neck. It smelled of stale, musty dirt, but the fur was still soft. I petted it, then set it aside.

August's attention was glued on me, his stare unwavering. I kept my focus on the box and reached for the papers, but at the last second I chose the locket. Again, it seemed the easier selection. The one with the least ramifications.

Dirt had lodged into its seam as well. It tumbled out when I pried it open, joining the debris on my bed. I frowned at the picture inside. "I don't get it." I rubbed my thumb over the faded image.

August leaned closer and the bed shifted. "Get what?"

Scrunching my face, I turned the locket over. There was nothing of interest except this one photo. "It's of my aunt Sarah. Why would my mother have buried a picture of my aunt?"

My affair theory darkened. I'd overheard that phone call so many years ago, Mary hissing at her sister, telling her never to call again. Could Sarah have been the other woman? Had Mary's own sister stolen her man, leaving her to raise her child alone? My body tensed at the possibility.

August eased the locket from my grip and studied it. "Seems odd, but I bet those pages explain it."

Item number three. The scariest of them all.

Sucking back a massive breath, I pulled them out. They were more fragile than the bound diary, dirt and dust unkind over the years. I spread them out gingerly. Three pages. My mother must have had a thing for threes. I lifted them and began to read.

*Dearest Gwen,*

*You will never read this. No one ever will. It makes it easier to tell you how much I love you. I loved you the moment you were conceived. I loved you for the nine months you filled my womb. I loved you more than I have ever loved anyone or anything, and giving you*

*up is the hardest thing I will ever have to do. But having Mary raise you will keep you safe. My sister will take better care of you.*

I gasped and clutched at my chest, as though that would ease the pain squeezing my heart. Tears burned my eyes.

“Baby, what is it?”

*Oh God, oh God, oh God.* I couldn’t answer. I couldn’t read more.

August slipped the trembling papers from my hand. When he said, “Holy shit,” I knew he’d read it.

As though detached, I observed my shaking hands, watched as my tears hit the gathered dirt on my blue duvet. A few spots turned muddy. I blinked and more tears fell. They felt like someone else’s tears. This felt like someone else’s room. That letter must belong to someone else.

“My mother wasn’t my mother,” I whispered.

August moved until he was alongside me, drawing me down to rest my head on his chest. He stroked my hair, kissed my head. I cried some more. I’d cried more the past two days than I had the past ten years. His soft shushing helped me gather myself. Gathering my thoughts proved more difficult.

“If Aunt Sarah was my mother, why did she stop calling and sending cards? Why did she cut me off?”

Harsh words from her sister shouldn’t have triggered her to disappear. Not when I’d been clueless to her identity. And why hadn’t it been safe to raise me herself? Why would Mom—*Mary*—have agreed to this?

A million questions swarmed my mind, along with a hint of relief...and a sting of guilt. Mary Hamilton hadn’t been my mother. The diary had belonged to Sarah, who had loved to dance and perform and cliff jump. Not Mary, who’d cheated me out of basic affection. The fact made me happy, which made me feel incredibly awful.

Mary had put her life on hold to raise me. She'd never wanted kids, as she'd once admitted. A burden like that could harden someone, embitter them. Keep them from dancing and laughing and living fully. I had in fact ruined her life.

No. *Not me*, I reminded myself. Her sister had.

August held me close. I burrowed closer, wanting to disappear, but I wanted answers more. I wiped my snotty nose before it dripped on his bare chest, then I kissed the center of his breastbone, nosed the dark curls dusting his skin. "I'm ready to read more."

I gathered the pages and joined him at my headboard, cuddling into the crook of his arm as we read the rest together.

*I didn't think I wanted kids, but the second I knew you existed, everything changed. I couldn't wait to share the news with your father. Ted Mercer was nothing but sweet with me, gentle and kind. You were created by two people very much in love. Unfortunately, I didn't know him as well as I thought.*

*When I went to tell him we were going to have a baby, I found him in an alley by my dance center. He and another man were harassing a third person, who was begging for his life, something about money owed. There was a gunshot. The begging man died. It wasn't your father who did the killing, but the man with him turned the gun on me.*

*Ted stalled the gunman while I got away. We met later, and he told me I would have to leave town, that the people he worked for were bad. I was a witness and I wasn't safe. He didn't have to tell me twice. Not with you growing inside me. I also never told him about you. I couldn't risk the information falling into the wrong hands.*

*I would have run as far as possible, but I didn't have money. I went to my parents for help, but they called me a sinner and turned me away. With nothing but the clothes on my back, I sought refuge with a*

*dance teacher. Aside from the teacher and my unsupportive parents, Mary was the only other person who knew about my pregnancy. She also intercepted a threat directed toward me, a promise to end my life if I ever turned up.*

*You don't know what it's like, living like you could die at any moment. I dropped out of school and wouldn't leave the house, wouldn't even open the curtains. You were born there, in the basement, and I have never loved anyone as much as you. I have also never been so terrified.*

*I'm in no shape to skip town with a newborn. I can't stay in San Francisco. But Mary showed up, days after your birth, with a suitcase stuffed with her own clothes because our parents had donated mine. She told me to leave town and plant roots somewhere safe. That you needed to be raised away from here. She said she would care for you until I got on my feet.*

*I cried for a week straight, then prepared to do as Mary asked. She put money in my wallet along with a bus ticket. She instructed me to send her suitcase back to her when I found a job and a home, explained that I should write my address at the back of my hidden journal. Somewhere discreet, in case it was intercepted. Then she would deliver you to me.*

*She organized everything, while I existed in a daze. She took charge, the way Mary always did. The good daughter. The strong daughter.*

*Today is the day I will be leaving you, Gwen, and the daze has cleared. I am not fit to raise a human being as perfect as you. I brought dangerous people into your life, before you were even born. I have no skills, no parents of my own to show me what to do.*

*Mary has an apartment. A job. A network of friends. I have nothing.*

*You deserve better than me.*

*I will not be sending that suitcase back. I will not be seeing you again. You will be better for it. You will lead a happy life, with my sister.*

*I'm sitting under a tree on Tank Hill now, about to bury this secret and my heart forever, but I don't see another way.*

*Please know that I love you, Gwen. So incredibly much.*

*Sarah*

Sarah. My mother. I no longer understood what those words meant. My life had become a novel. The twisty, crime kind with mafia and wise guys and bodies dumped into rivers, but under it all was a desperate teenager, drowning in despair. “She seemed so sad and alone.”

August’s expanding chest pressed against my body, making us both rise. He blew out a slow breath. “I can’t imagine what she went through.”

“And to leave me with her sister? Never come back for me? No wonder my mom or Mary, or whatever I’m supposed to call her, resented me.”

“She did come back, though, in a way. That’s why the luggage went missing. Eleven years late, but she sent for you.”

Eleven years. That number again. I picked apart my limited knowledge of my aunt-turned-mother. One fact rang clearer than the rest: she’d sent me birthday cards, one a year for eleven years, then they’d stopped. After a fight with her sister, because of me. There had never been a return address. I’d checked when the cards had stopped, thinking I’d reach out to her. My mother had likely been in the dark about her sister’s whereabouts. Had no way to deliver me to her.

If Sarah had called her to check on me, while refusing to reveal her location, it could have provoked Mary to lash out at her, tell her not to call again.

I filled August in on those details, my words tumbling out faster as I spoke. “Sarah must have sent the suitcase the next

year, after that call, before my twelfth birthday. Assumed I got it and chose not to contact her. Do you think that's why she cut our ties? Because I never reached out?"

His callused fingers grazed my arm, up and down as he stroked me. "This has to be an intensely sensitive issue for her. There's major insecurity with that. She must have assumed you didn't want contact. I'd choose to suffer over barging in on your life after that."

"But why not call? So many years later, why send the case?"

"Maybe the same reason people text and email. It's less personal. Rejection wouldn't sting as much. And the diary and note allowed you to know Sarah better than a shocking call."

I shut my eyes, listened to the *gegong-gegong* of August's steady heart. My aunt was my mother. My mother was my aunt. Mary could have been the girl who'd tracked my father to the Blue-Eyed Raven, desperate to find him. Hoping for a clue to her sister's location. There was no way to know. Mary and Ted were both gone. Still, I'd learned more today than I had in twenty-eight years.

Too much and not enough.

Here, tucked safely against August, the weight of it all felt bearable. Inconceivable, but bearable.

"Sarah gave me up to keep me safe and give me a better life," I said, as though speaking it aloud would make the choice clearer. It did, slightly.

"Sounds to me like she felt cornered, unable to care for you."

I couldn't imagine that kind of terror and impotence, but I remembered how depressed I'd been in college, how alone. No supports in my life. Add a madman trying to kill me and a surprise baby, and I might have cracked as epically as her. I also wasn't sure how to unpack this glimpse of my father, a man who'd threatened and had possibly killed people.

Thankfully, I hadn't knocked on that red door earlier. Who knows what would have greeted me? In time, I'd go. I'd ask

questions and learn all I could, find out if I had siblings. For now...

I wasn't sure what I'd do for now.

"Are you angry with her?"

August's question caught me off-guard. There were too many emotions to name. "I'm feeling kind of numb."

Again, I replayed the steps that had led me here, a twisted chess game of calculated moves and countermoves. Each bit of information learned the past two days, each second, minute, hour had contributed to discovering this secret. Without every choice made, good or bad, this box would have stayed buried, this truth forever lost.

Another possibility struck, so hard, I nearly bit my tongue. "We wouldn't be here."

August unlatched my hand from his ribs. I hadn't realized I'd dug my fingers in. He slinked down until we were eye to eye. "We wouldn't be where?"

"If Mary got the suitcase when she was supposed to, seventeen years ago, she would have given me the diary and address. I wouldn't have hesitated to move across the country." I pressed closer to him, wound our legs together. I soaked in his handsome face. "I wouldn't have driven you nuts as teens."

There would have been no WTF.

No painful years without him.

No making up and falling in love.

No Ainsley and Rachel.

August kissed me and rolled me on top of him. He secured his arms around my waist. "I hate that you missed growing up with your mother, but I'd be lying if I said I'm sorry you never got that diary. I don't know how I lived without you the past nine years, but I can promise you you'll be the first and last person I speak with every day for the next ninety-nine, no matter what countries we're living in."

I'd rather make it nine hundred and nine. "Time zones might make that tough."

"We'll send each other timed recordings."

"Of the dirty variety?"

He slapped my bottom. "Fuck yeah." He closed his eyes and brushed our noses together. A sweet, butterfly kiss.

At first, when the letter had sunk in, all I'd lost had burned my throat. I'd lived with a woman who I'd burdened instead of one who could have loved me. But if the reverse had led to a life without August, I wouldn't want it. He was my family. My life. My future. I rubbed my belly against his, imaging it swollen with our child. He would always come first.

I rested my full weight on him. He hugged me tighter. Our breaths slowed and thinned. I drifted off slightly, in and out of a foggy sort-of sleep, eventually waking half-on and half-off him. My room was dark, only a hallway light illuminating the space. I briefly wondered if I'd dreamed the letter and details I'd learned. I wasn't sure if I wanted this revelation to be real or imagined.

*Real*, I thought to myself. As real as the man who'd gathered me close to his thudding heart.

"I bet today is hard for her," I said, my voice thick from napping.

August stirred and hummed his agreement. "But it's your birthday, and it's already been rough. It's up to you how we spend it. You can call Sarah, if that number still works. We can hang out with your friends." He slipped his hands up my shirt and tickled my back. "We can spend it in bed."

As nice as that sounded, I was too overwrought to have sex. I kept glancing at the diary, the unearthed note. Couldn't stop picturing Sarah struggling today, hating herself for the choice she'd made. A deeper self-loathing than I'd ever experienced.

"I'd like to call her," I said, unsure it was the smart move, yet unable to put it off. "And I'd like to see the girls tonight."

My support network. The women I'd be leaning on after August left. "Is that okay?"

"Only if I can kiss you all night long." He planted several soft ones on my lips.

"I'll need as many as you can give. They'll have to last me awhile."

We kissed some more, slow and deep. He hardened against my thigh but didn't roll his hips or increase his groping. He knew exactly what I needed.

He grunted eventually and nudged me fully off him—a man could only take so much. I fell into the dirt pile smearing my bed.

He grimaced. "We need to shower again. A no-sex shower," he added, his voice gruff. "Then you can call Sarah, and *then* I'll take you out for your birthday. After, we'll talk about when I'm coming back to San Francisco and how excited I am for you to meet me in Germany. I'm gonna spoil you rotten. That cool with you, Possum?"

As nervous as I was about my impending phone call, as devastated as I was for him to drive to the airport at 5:30 a.m., my smile couldn't be faked. After all these years, August Cruz was my boyfriend. "It sounds perfect."



I sat on my couch, legs tucked under me, the phone heavy in my hand. My pulse feathered rapidly. I tried dialing Sarah's number several times, only to hit End each time. Part of me hoped the number was a dud, that I wouldn't be able to reach her yet. An excuse to pretend my life was *normalish* for one more night. A foolish wish.

August was in the bedroom, giving me privacy. I couldn't see him, but his proximity boosted my courage. I dialed again. The phone rang. I didn't hang up.

*Pound, pound, pound* went my thundering heart. I pressed the phone harder to my ear. The ringing persisted. No one

picked up. My reluctance shifted to desperation. A full one-eighty of mood swings. She *had* to answer. It had to be her number. Learning I'd never meet my father had been a harsh blow. This suddenly seemed essential, to hear Sarah's voice, connect with a parent. Tonight. Now.

The tendons in my neck felt ready to snap.

"Hello?" A voice answered. Her voice. My mother.

I opened my mouth to reply. Nothing came out.

"Hello?" Louder this time. There was a sweetness to her tone, modulated and pleasant. She didn't sound like me or her sister. She didn't sound like anyone I knew. She was a stranger, who was anything but. Another mother I wanted to know.

"Hi..." I cleared my scratchy throat. "I'm sorry to call like this. I'm just... This is..." I'd never been less eloquent in my life, the alphabet jumbling in my head.

"Who is this?" An edge crept into Sarah's cordial tone.

The truth had never seemed so daunting, three strangled words that would change both our lives forever. Finding my father had been a lifelong task, one I'd believed would have a concrete result. Like learning his name would give me closure. The treasure at the end of a grueling hunt. This wasn't the end, though. Finding my mother was the beginning. A journey I was ready to start.

Reminding myself how near August was, how full my life would always be, I said, "I'm your daughter."

She sucked a harsh breath. "Gwen?" Gone was her wariness, the tremble in my name hinting at tears.

My vision blurred. "It's me."

"But how?"

"It's a long story." The craziest of birthday adventures. "But the luggage you sent years ago got lost and turned up yesterday. Then I found your journal and the box on Tank Hill. I don't know what to think or do, but...I needed to call."

Sobbing slipstreamed through the line, ragged inhales. “Oh, Gwen. My Gwen.”

Each word swelled in my chest, so much hurt and love abrading her voice. Mine couldn't pass the fire lining my throat. I pressed my hand to my quivering lips. It didn't help. My tears fell, hope and regret wetting my cheeks. “I didn't know who you were. I got the cards, but I didn't know.”

“How could you?”

“Mom never said a word.” Mom. Mary. The woman who gave up her life to raise me.

“I should have called. I shouldn't have assumed, but Gwen...I just couldn't. I wasn't strong enough. I didn't think I deserved you.”

Exactly why I'd pushed August away. Like mother, like daughter.

A sniffly laugh escaped. “I can't believe this.”

Her crying intensified. It set me off again, the two of us blubbering shamelessly. Eventually, she gained control over her breaths, each one slowing. Mine calmed as well. A shudder passed from her end. Then, “Happy birthday, baby.”

A birthday I'd never forget.



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11:11 P.M.

49 MINUTES...



GWEN

It was later than intended by the time August and I met our friends. Kissing happened before we left my apartment. Then on the street. In the taxi. Outside the taxi. As much kissing as we could fit in during his last hours.

Talking with Sarah had helped clear my mind slightly. We'd kept the conversation short, both of us too emotional to say much. We'd made plans to talk again tomorrow. I was nervous for that exchange, one that would likely be more jarring. Painful wounds would be opened for us both. Whatever the outcome, it had to happen. She needed to know what my childhood had been like. I needed to know her life. We had to figure out who we were to each other.

I'd never been more thankful to see Rachel and Ainsley.

Their chosen bar was busy for a Sunday night. Industry night, they called it, for chefs and servers who usually worked while others partied. Hanger 47's tall ceilings gave the room an airiness, the corrugated walls, vintage lighting, and airplane memorabilia super cool.

Before August and I ordered drinks, the girls spotted us and dragged me away from the group.

Ainsley gave me the once-over. "You're late and you haven't returned my texts. What kind of best friend do you think you are?"

Rachel rolled her eyes. “What she means to say is, are you okay? Is everything good with you and August?”

“Right. Yeah. That.” Ainsley nodded. Her curvy figure was pronounced in a stunning cream dress with sheer sleeves and a dangerously high hemline. Rachel’s risqué cutaway dress was courtesy of Ainsley, too. Personal shopper extraordinaire. I’d have to book her for an afternoon, use her expertise to source a sexy ensemble for my Germany trip.

My sights drifted past the tattooed clientele who frequented this place—most ink depicting a vegetable or cooking utensil on arms or necks—and landed on my guy. August was chatting with Owen and Jimmy. Cameron and Emmett joined them with fresh drinks. August spoke with his friends, but his heated glances cut my way often.

I may not have sipped any wine yet, but a warm path slid down inside my chest. “Everything is amazing with August,” I told the girls.

Rachel sighed. “She’s fallen in love.”

“It’s sickeningly sweet.” Ainsley beamed at me.

If I looked as dopey as them when they swooned over their men, sickeningly sweet was the perfect description. “I booked a flight to meet him in Germany. We’re determined to make this work.” I didn’t mention August’s and my baby talk, our hopes to one day have kids. I felt too fragile. But it sent my mind to my newfound history, how it would feel to give up my yet-to-be conceived child. My insides twisted at the thought.

Rachel touched my wrist lightly. “If things are good, why do you look sad?”

“He’s leaving,” Ainsley said, pointing out the obvious. “Of course she’s sad.”

I *was* sad August was going, but excited, too. I would torment the man of my dreams through dirty texts. Seeing him again would be the best kind of reunion. “Saying goodbye to him will be painful, but some other big stuff happened.”

Rachel and Ainsley stared at me, wide-eyed, as I laid out my crazy day and the diary details, how August had kept the

information from me, that act leading to the biggest case us two Badass PI partners had ever cracked: my father and the woman who'd raised me were dead, but my aunt was my mother...and she was alive.

"You never found your father, but you found your mother instead," Ainsley said, awed. "I'm barely standing after that revelation. How are you on your feet?"

Rachel wiped a tear from her freckled cheek. "Because she's the strongest woman we know."

I glanced down at my body. August had unleashed a sexy growl when he'd seen me in my leather pants, three-inch heels, and red strapless top. He'd said he loved how strong I was.

Standing here, still on my feet after my insane day, wasn't because I could do burpees and box jumps. Growing up in a cold home had toughened me. I'd learned to breathe through stress, repeat stupid movie titles if needed. Play not-very-good guitar. Now I had a man who loved me and the best friends a woman could want. I'd earned this inner strength.

All I said was, "Of course I'm here. I wouldn't miss our birthdays."

The three of us hugged, our twenty-seventh year almost over. Year twenty-eight would knock it out of the park.

"With August gone, we'll have to rally." Ainsley rubbed my arm. "I'll bake you my famous spinach brownies."

Rachel and I traded horrified looks. "It's not necessary," I said.

"Of course it is."

"It's really not."

"Owen loves them. I'll make a double batch."

Those vegan brownies tasted like cardboard mated with grass. If Owen ate them, he either had the palate of a starving prisoner, or he was the best boyfriend this side of Canada.

"I'll make extra for you, too," Ainsley told Rachel.

“Will you look at the time?” Rachel glanced at her slender wrist, which didn’t house a watch. “Pretty sure it’s almost midnight. We should get back to the boys.” Crafty girl, dodging the brownies.

She kissed my cheek before we moved. “But Ainsley’s right. Not about the awful brownies, but about us rallying. We’re here for you. If you need a breather, come visit me in Napa. If you need me to make an emergency trip here, just say the word.”

I squeezed her elbow. “I’d be lost without you ladies. And you realize what this means, right?” When I had their attention, I pulled three folded papers from my front pocket.

They both gasped.

“I forgot we did that,” Rachel said.

This time last year, we’d made resolutions that would change our lives. We’d written them on papers to hold ourselves accountable. Rachel and Ainsley had fulfilled theirs months ago. Mine had seemed impossible, the distant hope to know my father having slipped through my fingers when Mary had died.

I may not have met him, but I’d discovered his name, my history, and I’d hopefully be meeting my birth mother in the coming months. “I’d say we rocked the shit out of our birthday wishes.”

“Was there ever any doubt?” The pride in Ainsley’s voice was contagious.

I gave the girls their papers and pocketed mine. “To another amazing year.”

Ten minutes before the clock struck midnight, we joined our men. Jimmy pulled Rachel’s back into his chest and wrapped his arms around her. Owen did the same with Ainsley and played with the pendant hanging from her necklace.

August winked at me and picked up a glass of red wine from the bar. “Figured you’d want this.”

“You’re a mind reader.” I did want the wine. I also wanted him. In a simple white T-shirt and faded jeans, he was lickable. My libido revved back to life.

He tucked me into his side and raised his glass to the group. “Is there a birthday wish on tap this year?”

“I don’t need a wish to get what I want,” Ainsley said. I expected her to make a show of kissing Owen, but she batted her Lancôme lashes at his brother. “If Emmett doesn’t tell me what Owen’s tattoo means, I’ll tell his boyfriend about the gift I’m buying for Emmett’s birthday this year.”

Emmett narrowed his eyes at her. “Nice try, but this guy”—he flicked his thumb toward Cameron, whose hand was in Emmett’s back pocket—“knows what I’m packing below.”

Playing along, Cameron waggled his eyebrows. “Any bigger and I’d be in trouble.”

Undeterred, Ainsley tapped her index finger against her chin, as though contemplative. “I’m not sure I believe you, and I bet the crowd here might wonder why I feel obliged to buy you a...PENIS PUMP.”

She said it loud enough that a few people turned their heads.

I snickered. The fact that Owen had Japanese words tattooed on his ass was funny. The fact that he’d been clueless to their meaning until this year was priceless. The cheeky (pun intended) man now refused to tell Ainsley. Just to torture her.

“Not amusing,” Emmett said, then grumbled something under his breath.

“I’m still waiting.” Ainsley cleared her throat, ready to crow.

Emmett jutted his chin at Owen. “Just tell her already. She’ll only get worse.”

“It’s true,” Rachel said. “She’s like a fashionable pit bull.”

Owen dashed a hand through his sandy hair and shrugged. He leaned down and whispered in Ainsley’s ear. She bit her lip and covered her heart with her hand as she listened. Blue eyes

glazed, she looked at Emmett. “You’re forgiven for not telling me.”

“Now I want to know,” I said. Ainsley rarely got choked up.

She ignored me and pressed a kiss to Owen’s chest.

“So no real wishes?” Jimmy asked us.

“Come on,” August said, jumping on Jimmy’s prodding. “Isn’t this wish thing a big deal with you ladies?” The way his smolder slid to me suggested he wanted a say in mine.

Rachel studied Ainsley and me, both of us wrapped up in our men, then she clinked her wineglass against Jimmy’s. “I think we all have what we need. It’s also about that time.”

The start of our twenty-eighth year.

We all shrunk into groups of two, happy to celebrate our new beginnings privately, and I had a slew of new beginnings to contemplate.

August pulled me around to face him. My favorite fresh start. “I love you, Possum. I know the last couple days have been nuts, but being with you is better than I could have dreamed.” My best friend pressed me against the bar and kissed me deeply, unconcerned by the busy room.

I nipped his bottom lip. “Best birthday yet.”

I didn’t need a resolution this year. If anything, I’d need as much status quo as possible, considering the changes I’d be facing: meeting my mother, balancing my job and interests with my man and my friends, sustaining a long-distance relationship.

August’s warm gaze roved over my face. “You sure you’re doing okay?”

Staring up at him, my answer came easily. “Surprisingly, yes. Tomorrow will be a different story, but we have now.”

“Our seconds,” he whispered.

“Every last one,” I agreed.

# EPILOGUE



TWO YEARS AND SEVEN SECONDS LATER

AUGUST

My strut offstage wasn't pretty. I nearly bailed over a set of cables, I accidentally knocked over the water glass I'd had the roadies set out, and I almost dropped my guitar while handing it off. Getting my hands on Gwen trumped a smooth exit.

Fans were great. Performing was a rush. Nothing beat wrapping her in my arms, especially when it had been three long weeks.

She grinned when I stepped backstage, clapping like it was the first time she'd seen me in concert. "You were amazing."

I lifted her up and pressed my face into her neck. "Missed you so fucking much."

She giggled when I bit her collarbone. "I couldn't get here fast enough. Wish I could have caught the start of the show." She said this while covering my face in kisses. I landed a dirty one on her mouth.

My brother wolf-whistled, obnoxiously enough to pull us apart. "You don't get paid more for the peep show."

I snagged a guitar pick from my pocket and flicked it at him. "Might need to amend my contract."

He failed to bat away my pathetic assault and the pick hit his cheek. He curled his lip playfully. “Doubt Uncle Rex will be flexible, but I could book you at Hunk-O-Mania. Bet those women would slide money down your G-string if you show skin.”

Having Finch as my manager had invigorated my North American career, enough that I could split my time between Europe and here. Unfortunately, it came with his smart mouth. “The only woman I strip for is right here.” I kissed Gwen again.

Finch groaned. “You guys need to keep the PDA on lockdown.”

Gwen blew him a kiss. “Not a chance.”

Grumbling, Finch marched off, and I breathed in all things Gwen. “Happy birthday, Possum. Sorry it’s slightly late.”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s the best one yet.”

“You say that every year.”

“I mean it every year.”

If we were alone, I’d make sure nothing beat this year’s celebration. I’d glide her zipper down and slip my hand into her panties, coat my fingers in her wetness and make her shudder. Then I’d make love to her all night. All morning, too. Man, did I miss her.

I’d arrived in San Francisco late this afternoon, had hightailed it to the Blue-Eyed Raven before Gwen had finished work. She, of course, had to spend time with Rachel and Ainsley before making the show. Our whirlwind of a life.

“Where’s my girl?” I asked while sneaking a taste of her ear.

“Right here.”

Damn straight. “And my other girl?”

“In your dressing room. Sarah’s with her.”

After much deliberation, Gwen had decided to call her mother and her aunt by their given names. Not Mom and Aunt

Mary. Less confusion for her. As awful as Gwen's childhood had been at times, she saw Mary in a different light now. As a woman who'd sacrificed everything to raise her. It didn't undo the damage those years had caused, but it helped. As did getting to know her birth mother.

Another new woman in my life.

Except the only other girl I was itching to see had my nose, her mother's eyes, and the prettiest wisps of dark hair this side of the moon.

Keeping a tight hold on Gwen's hand, I led us to my dressing room. Sarah was reading a magazine while Lola slept in her portable playpen. An eleven-month-old treasure.

I went to reach for my girl, but Gwen tugged me back. "Don't you dare wake her."

"But it's been three weeks." I sounded like a whiney kid.

"I don't care if it's been three years. She has your vocal gift and isn't afraid to show it. I may need a hearing aid."

"But I—"

She pressed her finger to my lips. "...*but I* nothing. You're gonna make little miss's mom happy by taking her for a birthday drink while grandma watches *The Voice's* future star."

Sarah waved her magazine in a shooing motion toward the door. "I've got my van loaded already. I just need to pack Lola and the playpen, and we'll be off. I'll bring her 'round first thing tomorrow."

Sarah moving to San Francisco last winter had been a godsend. My folks visited from Chicago a couple times a year, not enough to lean on them for support. Having Sarah in town meant Gwen could return to CrossFit and her other pursuits, while someone we trusted watched Lola.

The first six months or so between Sarah and Gwen had been dicey. Nothing easy about discovering your estranged aunt was your mother. The two had worked hard to move forward, even visiting Ted Mercer's home together. He hadn't had any other children, but they'd talked with his widow, had

learned he'd left his criminal pursuits in favor of construction work. A simple life for a complicated man, in the end. The meeting had given Sarah and Gwen some closure.

Watching them together now, how easily they smiled, how Sarah strived to ease Gwen's burdens, spend time with Lola, get to know our family? It choked me up at times.

"I'll agree to whisking Gwen away on a late-night date," I said, "*if* I get to carry Lola to your van." I was needy to smell Lola's baby smell, a mix of springtime and lavender and perfection.

Gwen rolled her eyes. "Fine, but you better not tickle her."

"We have a deal."

Gingerly, I lifted Lola and cradled her against my chest. My fragile sweet thing. She gurgled, the soft sound filling my heart until it nearly burst, and I fought the urge to wake her. I got her settled in her car seat without incident. I didn't tickle or poke her just to see her open her eyes. Vibrant eyes, like her mother's.

Gwen said Lola looked more like me. I thought she looked more like her. My wife. Words I never thought would describe Gwen Hamilton. Other words came to mind, the ones that filled my lyrics these days.

*Partner.*

*Lover.*

*Mate.*

*Everything.*

And always *fever*. For the rest of my life, I'd burn for this woman.

## BONUS SERIES EPILOGUE



### TEN YEARS LATER

JIMMY

“What part of you thinks I can fit behind there?” August gestured angrily at my sleek living-room chair. “I’m not a contortionist.”

“You’re smaller than me.” Owen flexed his biceps, straining the sleeves of our matching T-shirts.

Owen’s two kids rolled their eyes, followed by a muttered “These shirts are a crime against humanity” from his oldest, Tommy. He was the spitting image of Owen, with his sandy hair and dimpled cheeks, but his clothing obsession was all Ainsley. Their youngest, Coco—a killer athlete, who’d rather play mud football than go shopping—had no issues wearing the shirts we’d made for tonight’s surprise party.

Not that the T-shirts were stylish. But they were fun, each one bright pink and splashed with the saying *You make forty look good*.

The T-shirts had been August’s idea. Owen organized the cake. The surprise party we were about to have had been my suggestion—a simple get-together with our tightknit families to celebrate a new decade for the women we loved. Their actual shared birth date wasn’t until next week, but celebrating on the actual day would’ve been too risky. The only way to pull off this surprise, without one of them catching wind of our plans, was to do it early.

“If you don’t like your hiding the spot,” I told August, “you’re welcome to spend the night out back with my girls. Keep them company.”

“Thanks to you, your girls love sticking their noses in my...” He gestured to his dick instead of saying the word. “Hard pass.”

I chuckled. All it had taken was dropping bacon down his shorts once. Now our three rescue dogs—Pinot, Syrah, and Cabernet—beelined for August’s crotch whenever he was in sniffing distance. His kids and Gwen thought it was hilarious. August had vowed revenge.

“Can we go play with the dogs?” Lola held her hands into prayer, her sweet voice and pleading eyes impossibly cute. “Mom won’t be here for, like, ten minutes.”

Somehow, August held his ground and shook his head. “She’s supposed to be here in two, sweetie. There’s no time.”

Her raised eyebrow made her look miles older than her ten years. “She’s out with Auntie Rachel and Auntie Ainsley. They never get home on time when they’re together.”

“Valid point,” I said.

Smiling, August tapped Lola’s temple. “Clever girl, always one step ahead of me. But you can’t be long. Take your brothers and come back in six minutes flat. And make sure you don’t let the dogs in. If they destroy the cake, you won’t get any.”

Lola licked her lips while eyeing the realistic tequila-bottle cake, complete with a shot glass and lime wedge. Since our wives had met at a random bar on their shared twenty-first birthdays, and sealed their friendship with an obscene amount of tequila shots, we’d agreed the commemoration was fitting. But our youngest dog, Pinot, was a food stealer and counter surfer. If she snuck in here, there would be cake carnage.

Lola ushered her brothers, Hanson and Freddie, out with her. Predictably, Owen’s kids didn’t want to miss any fun. Tommy and Coco rushed out for a quick play with the dogs, too.

Owen closed his eyes and let out a long breath. “Do you hear that?” he whispered.

August and I exchanged confused glances. “Your wheezy breaths?” I asked.

He smirked. “The quiet.”

“Wow.” August looked around the home Rachel and I had built together on the winery, like he was seeing the vaulted ceiling and whitewashed interior for the first time. “I didn’t recognize that sound. Is this what peace is like?”

I chuckled. “You two love your madness and wouldn’t have it any other way.”

August toured with screaming fans, then came home to his three kids and Gwen, who dragged him out on hikes and bike rides. No rest for the wicked. Owen used power tools all day, building one-of-a-kind furniture for discerning clients, then he picked his kids up at school and chauffeured them around, while Ainsley oversaw her growing styling empire and hurried home for whatever dinner her husband had prepared.

None of their lives were quiet, but they fucking loved it.

Owen planted his huge hand on my shoulder. “And you love your quiet nights. Different strokes for different folks.”

He was right about that. Forgoing kids hadn’t been a tough choice for Rachel and me. More of an organic decision, really. Our lives had been so full with the dogs and the winery and our yearly Napa festival, and making love on every available surface in our home, we decided we were happy with our family of two.

A perfect life for us. Just like our friends had carved out their own Utopias, as Ainsley liked to say.

Owen shoved a balloon away from his head. “Did we go overboard on the decor?”

“Nah,” I said. The kids had stuck up birthday signs all over the place. Streamers spilled down from the tall ceilings. The six stands of floating balloon bouquets near the living room entrance were a bit extreme, but there was no such thing as

“too much” when it came to our wives. They deserved the fucking world.

I punched one balloon, knocking it into August’s head. “They’ll dig it.”

“Such a dick,” August muttered as he pummeled a balloon into my face.

I snorted and smacked another one into him, while Owen shook his head and mumbled, “Couple of idiots.”

The sound of tires on gravel had us freezing.

“Get the kids,” I said, “then get your asses hidden.”

Ten frenzied seconds later, August was contorted behind my living room chair, his three kids were crushed together under the table giggling and poking at each other, Owen was crouched behind the couch with Coco and Tommy, and I stood at the window, watching for when the girls headed toward the front door.

“They’re in,” I said and jogged for my position behind the loveseat.

Laughter drifted in, including Rachel’s adorable cackle that never failed to make me smile. Then the word *dildo* floated our way.

I froze. Owen made a choking sound.

The girls could be discussing the night they’d gotten wasted and wandered into a sex shop, at which point Rachel had shouted “I have a penis” while waving a dildo. This had occurred before my time, but I’d luckily seen the video. Or they were sharing stories about currently owned devices.

Either way, August’s youngest son, Freddie, poked Lola under their table. “What’s a dildo?” he whispered.

I couldn’t see August from my vantage point, but I heard his plaintive grumble. I laughed under my breath. There would be an awkward discussion at their home tonight.

The girls got louder, thankfully talking about their lunch and not sex shops. We stayed quiet, all of us holding a

collective breath.

The second they stepped into the living room, we jumped out of our hiding spots and shouted, “Surprise!”

“Oh my God.” Rachel covered her mouth with both hands, her eyes bright with delight.

Ainsley shrieked and did a cute jump.

“Look at this place!” Gwen grinned, her attention darting over the streamers, balloons, and cake. “I had no idea.”

Freddie yelled, “Surprise!” again, instigating all the kids to jump and shout, “Surprise!” over and over as we all laughed and indulged them...until a blur of black and white flew past me.

Shit.

“Dogs in the house!” Owen called, stating the obvious.

Not good.

All three dogs were suddenly tearing around and barking, eager to get in on the *surprise* action. A balloon popped. Cabernet jumped on Coco, nearly knocking her down. Pinot, the crafty terror, already had her white paws on the counter and her face in the tequila cake.

“Pinot, *no!*” My shout had her running away from me, but the top of the Patron bottle was already down her throat.

*Note to self: Don't leave kids in charge of closing a door to keep the dogs outside.*

I chased the heathens into the backyard, gave them a stern talking to, then returned to the more subdued group.

“It’s not even our birthdays yet,” Ainsley said, grinning up at Owen. “Did you get the date wrong?”

He kissed the top of her head. “How else did you expect us to surprise you?”

“Well...” Smirking, she pulled back and smoothed his T-shirt. “You definitely surprised me by wearing this awful shirt.”

“What did I tell you?” Tommy pulled at his cotton shirt like the thing was made of mucus. “I told them, Mom. But no one listened to me.”

She ruffled his hair. “We can hit the sewing machine at home. Turn them into upcycled purses or something.”

“That would actually be cool.” Tommy stared down at his shirt with *slightly* less distaste. “But they still suck.”

“The T-shirts were my idea,” August said, raising his hand. “If anyone is getting blamed, it’s me.”

Gwen kissed his cheek. “They’re perfect, babe.” But mischief sparkled in her eyes. “You should wear yours at your next concert.”

He recoiled. “Not happening.”

“But you look so good in pink, and your fans will think it’s adorable. Right, kids?”

A chorus of *yeses* rang out as his brood crowded around him and tried to convince him to wear the ugly shirt at his next show.

Rachel and I shared a soft smile. As much as we enjoyed our quieter nights, we also loved being part of our friends’ mayhem, and joking about their antics afterward.

Our chosen family adding fullness to our lives.

She slipped her arm around my waist and stared at the partly-demolished cake. “Why is it shaped like a tequila bottle?”

I sighed at the wreckage. Pinot was lucky she was a cute mutt. “You girls drank tequila the night you met. It was an homage.”

Rachel pulled off a chunk of cake and ate it, finishing with a satisfied hum. “The cake is good, but the sentiment behind this party with all my favorite people here?” She fitted herself to my chest and pulled my head down. “I love this, and I love you.”

“Not half as much as I love you.” I kissed her lightly. Brushed my nose against hers. “Happy almost fortieth, Sunshine.”

She nuzzled into my side, watched our friends and their families laughing and talking. “I thought getting older would be tough. Depressing or upsetting, but honestly...” She let out a satisfied sigh—the happy sound she often made when I caught her staring at me. “Life just keeps getting better.”

“Like a fine wine,” I agreed.

She nodded. “Aged to perfection.”

“I bet your new motorcycle helps.”

Her entire face lit up. “It’s so fast.”

“My little wild woman.” I never expected her to love riding as much as me, or that she’d ever get a proper tattoo. When I saw words inked across her ribs—the Chardonnay description I’d written in her honor, from our inaugural Sunshine Chardonnay line—I’d been shocked. And turned on. Rachel continued to surprise me in the best ways, challenging herself as a winemaker, testing her bad-girl boundaries.

And she kept me in line. “I think you were right,” I admitted.

She pressed her hand to her heart, feigning shock. “I should get my phone. Record this moment.”

Cheeky woman. I pinched her hip. “I should quit feeding Pinot from the table, like you said. Be more stern with her.”

She patted my stomach. “The thought is sweet, but you won’t. You’re too much of a softy.”

She was probably right, dammit. At least I was good at other things. “In case you’re wondering,” I added quietly. “The second our friends are gone, I’ll be covering you in any leftover cake and licking every inch of you. That pussy is mine tonight.”

“Jesus, Jimmy.” Her freckled face flamed a pretty shade of red.

Flustering Rachel was still my favorite hobby.

“It’s toast time!” Ainsley called, motioning us over.

We joined our friends as Owen passed around glasses of wine for what had become a birthday tradition. The girls no longer made elaborate wishes in hopes of changing their lives. Instead, they shared a communal toast of thanks.

Gwen raised her glass first. “To the best friends a girl could have. To three kids who always keep their rooms tidy and help clean up after dinner.” Her children rolled their eyes at her good-natured sarcasm. “To my rock star husband, who I miss like crazy when he’s away and love him even harder when he’s home. I’m so lucky to have all of you.”

Kisses and hugs were shared among her family, warming up the room even more.

“To the best friends a girl could have,” Rachel said, repeating their usual first line. “To a job I love and a man I love even more.” She kissed my chest—the spot where I’d had her nickname, Sunshine, tattooed. “To living each day to the fullest.”

I kissed her, harder than was decent in our company, but this crew was used to our PDA.

The kids made gagging sounds. Laughter rang out around us. We finally parted and sipped our wine.

“To the best friends a girl could have,” Ainsley began, taking Owen’s wineglass since she didn’t have her own. “To my husband, who puts up with my crazy and multitasks like a wizard. To my kids, who are my whole world, and...” She shared a tender look with Owen, her eyes getting misty. “To the newest addition to our family, who will be here in seven months.”

“Oh my God.” Gwen nearly dropped her glass.

Owen rubbed Ainsley’s belly, looking so damn pleased with himself, while the rest of us gaped at the couple.

“Did you know they were trying?” I asked Rachel.

She shook her head, grinning at the pair. “Last we talked about it, Ainsley said they weren’t planning on more.”

Maybe the baby was unplanned. Judging by their glow and how protectively Owen held Ainsley against him, they were thrilled with the news. So much goodness for these people I loved.

Congratulations were passed around. Hugs. Back pounds. Jokes about reverting to diaper duty. We ate mangled cake and celebrated our wives and good fortune, while I thanked the fucking stars I wandered into a random bar and heard Rachel shout *pussy*, forever changing my life.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kelly Siskind lives in charming northern Ontario. When she's not out hiking or skiing, you can find her, notepad in hand, scribbling down one of the many plot bunnies bouncing around in her head. She loves singing while driving, looks awful in yellow, and is known for spilling wine at parties. Sign up for Kelly's newsletter at [www.kellysiskind.com](http://www.kellysiskind.com) and never miss a giveaway, a free bonus scene, or the latest news on her books. And connect with her on Twitter and Instagram (@kellysiskind) or on Facebook and TikTok (@authorkellysiskind).